The Daughter Pays

Mrs. Baillie Reynolds

THE DAUGHTER PAYS

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

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By Mrs. Baillie Reynolds

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By Mrs. Baillie Reynolds

TO

ALICE PERRIN

PRE-EMINENT IN SYMPATHY FOR THE WORK OF HER SISTER WRITERS

WITH AFFECTIONATE ADMIRATION

Qui que tu sois, voici ton maître!
Il l'est, le fut, ou le doit être.

Inscription upon a statue of Love, in the Louvre.

Freely rendered —

Whoe'er thou art, thy lord is he.
He is, or was, or he must be.

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN THE GALLERY

"Yes, I have felt like some deserted world
That God hath done with, and had cast aside
Untilled, no use, no pleasure, not desired . . .
Could such a world have hope that, some blest day,
God would remember her, and fashion her
Anew?"—JEAN INGELOW.

THE full sunshine of late June, tempered by the medium of London atmosphere, illumined the long extent of Gallery Number Sixteen at Hertford House.

It was a pay-day, and there were, in consequence, but few visitors. The expanse of polished floor glimmered with a suggestion of coolness, a hint of ice; and the summer light touched with brilliance the rich colour on the walls, the mellow harmonies of the bits of old furniture ranged below.

The space and solitude, the silence and sunlight, emphasised and threw into strong relief the figures of two girls, deep in contemplation before the portrait of Isabella, wife of Paul de Vos.

Though these were modern, even ultra-modern, Nattier and Boucher, great interpreters of an artificial age, might have hailed them as kindred spirits. They seemed eloquent of all that luxury could produce in the way of exotic perfection. But for the absence of rouge and powder, they were as far removed from the dingy, the commonplace, or the underbred, as any pre-Revolution

marquise, smiling from the windows of her château upon a world dark with misery, convulsed with pain, and all unconscious of its very existence.

Far indeed from these hot-house blooms seemed the seamy side. They were of those who feed on the roses and lie in the lilies of life. They belonged to the class which a novelist of our own day has so happily described as expensive. They were the fine flower of our epoch, and unconscious of their own supreme selfishness.

One was of the petite type, gipsy brown and captivating, from the tip of her plumes to the shoes and stockings which matched her gown, and upon whose buckles the light winked. The other was taller and more willowy. She was not big, but formed with the lithe grace of the modern Atalanta. Something in the veiled loveliness of her soft eye suggested a dove. Her hair was fair, and her face, wide across the brows, and tapering at the chin, seemed designed to make an involuntary appeal to the heartstrings of any man who looked at her. Every movement of this girl was graceful. Yet one would have felt certain that her grace was unstudied; she was not self-conscious; her attentions seemed entirely absorbed by the beauty of the paintings at which she gazed.

Thus she stood, her chin uplifted; and a man who entered, with halting step, from Gallery Fifteen, shot a keen glance and stopped short.

He was not a young man, and his dress, for London, was negligent; whilst his long black moustache gave him a slightly out-of-date, or provincial, aspect. His black hair showed some grey at the temples, but he appeared to be in vigorous health.

For some long moments he stood in absorbed contemplation of the girlish figure isolated against the dim, dignified background of the gallery: and as he gazed there crept into his face an expression which made it almost

devilish. Every feature hardened — the mouth took on a sneer, the eyes glowed with some concentration of feeling which altered his whole face for the worse.

As yet unconscious of his presence, the girl gazed on; and after a minute her smaller, darker friend strolled up and joined her. She said something that made the other laugh. The chime of their mirth sounded sweetly through the empty space, but brought to the lips of the watcher a curl of contempt. He began to move forward slowly, seemingly intent upon the pictures, but always coming nearer, until he stood where he could hear the girls' light, careless talk.

"My dear," said the smaller girl, "I am thinking all the time what a fancy dress this would make, for anybody that could wear it." They were standing before Mierevelt's lovely portrait of the young nameless lady in the ruff.

As her companion did not immediately reply, she added insistently: "Virginia! Did you hear?"

The lame man started, or, as it were, winced at the sound of the name; yet a certain satisfaction crept into his eyes, as of one who inly reflects: "I thought so! I was not mistaken."

Virginia, thus appealed to, brought her dreamy gaze from the portrait of the burgomaster who sits with his small son. "What? A fancy dress? Oh, Mims, yes! That little bit of stiffened lace round the back of her hair is an inspiration. I could make it, too — I see just how it's done."

The two proceeded to examine the head-dress in detail, with girlish talk about the way to copy it. "Gold embroidery all down the front of her gown. How sweet!" sighed Virginia admiringly. "But that ruff — would it do?"

"For you? Of course! You could wear it, for you

have a throat. But what *did* little people like me do, when they had all that between their chin and their chest?"

Virginia was much amused. "No, Mims, you were not made for a ruff! But then, *en revanche,* you can wear all those lovely Venetian reds and ambers that I can't touch!"

Childish talk, but with no suspicion of a critical listener! The lame man heard every word. As the eager girl turned to point across the gallery to a picture exemplifying the colours she meant, she slightly brushed against him, for he was standing within a few feet of her. He stepped back, raising his hat in acknowledgment of her gentle apology; and his eyes, full of something between hostility and contempt, met hers hardly, as if in a challenge, for a puzzling instant before he turned away and limped to another place.

Virginia's colour rose and her lips set, as if an unspoken insult had reached her. She was not used to read hostility in the eyes of men. She recovered, however, in a moment, and continued her study of the pictures, moving round for some minutes longer, until Miriam, leaning near her, murmured:

"Shall we go into the next room? There is a custodian there, and that man keeps on staring odiously."

"Yes; let us go and look at the Greuzes," replied Virginia.

It was not long before the unknown man followed them. He was now more careful, however, and kept his eyes for the beauties of the catalogue instead of allowing them to roam towards the beauties of his own day.

"I don't think he meant to be rude," presently said Virginia doubtfully. "He looked at me almost as though he thought he knew me — as if he expected me to speak to him."

"My dear, it is evident that you must never be allowed to go about London alone," laughed Mims. "As if he knew you, indeed! That's the commonest dodge of all. I am sure he is trying to be rude — he is edging round here now ——"

"Oh, nonsense! Let us think about the pictures and take no notice. He could not be rude in a public place like this — he cannot think we are girls of that sort."

"There's the portrait of you," said Mims mischievously, pausing before Greuze's picture entitled "Innocence"— the picture with the lamb.

It was true, the likeness was striking. Virginia even coloured slightly as she gazed. "Chocolate box!" said she disdainfully. "Greuze is only pretty-pretty! I would far rather be like Isabella de Vos!"

As she spoke she moved away with her undulating grace, the lame man having again approached nearer than was quite consistent with good manners.

"That's the worst of you, Virginia — you can't go about without dragging backwards the heads of all the men that pass," said Mims in injured tones.

"Talk about glass-houses!" was her friend's sarcastic response, adding with a little sigh: "Well, you won't long be troubled. Cinderella's clock strikes to-morrow, and I go back to Wayhurst and my native obscurity."

Miriam's soft, dark eyes clouded.

"Native obscurity! No, my dear, that's the tragedy! You were *not* born to it, and you will never thrive in it! Oh, the pity! I could cry when I think of you, mewed up in that wee brick-box of a villa, and when I remember that it's not much more than two years ago since we were staying with you at Lissendean — riding, hunting, motoring!"

"Don't talk of it, Mimsie, for pity's sake! It can't be

helped, you know; and, of course, it isn't half as bad for me as for poor mother."

Mims made a grumpy sound. She was depressed, not only by her friend's impending departure, but by the thought of that friend's destiny.

Virginia Mynors, in the days when she and Miriam Rosenberg were at school together, had been queen of everything. She was the elder daughter of a county gentleman, her clothes came from the best places, she took all the extras, rode, swam, hunted — with no more thought of ways and means than her present appearance led one to suppose.

During the weary days of her father's long illness — a kind of creeping paralysis which lasted for two years — Virginia had known that he had money troubles. But though she had been his devoted nurse and trusted secretary, she was no more prepared than was her butterfly mother for the state of financial catastrophe revealed at his death. The solid ground had failed beneath her feet. Everything was gone. Even Lissendean, the home in which she had been born, was mortgaged. They all moved out, the house was let, and upon the few hundreds a year received as rent her mother, herself, her brother Antony, and her little sister Pansy, were to live.

Virginia had to be the moving spirit in it all. She elected to settle at Wayhurst, because there is an excellent public school there, and, as a day boy, Antony, who was nearly fourteen, might obtain the education of a gentleman. For nearly two years now such had been the girl's life. Yet even Miriam did not guess the truth — did not guess the drudgery and devotion of Virginia's daily round.

Mr. Rosenberg was what is described as rolling in money. He had social ambitions, and was very well pleased when his daughter made friends at school with the daughter of Bernard Mynors. The Rosenbergs, brother

and sister, had more than once accepted the whole-hearted hospitality of Lissendean. Their father could not, therefore, with any good grace, make objections to Miriam's pleading when she begged to have Virginia to stay with her.

Miriam had a great deal too much pocket-money. She sent a substantial cheque to Virginia, that she might provide herself with an outfit and railway fares for the projected visit. Virginia was able to devote part of this cheque to the providing of what was locally known as a "supply" to do the housework while she herself was away. She belonged, indeed, to that wonderful type of woman who can make a pound, expended upon clothes, go as far as another woman makes five, or even ten. She arrived in Bryanston Square for her visit with exactly the right frocks, with her spirits high, and her bloom unimpaired, in spite of the hard life she led. Youth and high spirit will carry all before them. Mr. Rosenberg, when his astute eye rested upon the charming creature, became suddenly aware of her as an incarnate temptation to his son Gerald, upon whom all his hopes were concentrated.

Mr. Rosenberg was not without good impulses. He desired to befriend this beautiful girl to whom Fate had shown herself so cruel. It was, however, more than could be demanded of human nature that he should be ready to console her for her misfortunes with the gift of all his wealth and all his social ambition. As a man of business, he divined her mother to have been the ruin of the family. He knew Mrs. Mynors as a lovely, vain, shallow and selfish person, who all her life had lived for her own amusement. Such a mother-in-law would be a burden that Gerald could never carry. Moreover, there were two younger children, of whom one, the little girl, was badly crippled — a permanent invalid.

Had Virginia, being her father's daughter, stood alone,

it is just possible that her extreme beauty would have brought Mr. Rosenberg to the point of allowing the match. With her encumbrances he felt it to be impossible. He did not know that it was at Gerald's instigation that Mims had gone to the length of actually financing the scheme of the visit. Yet his shrewdness rather suspected something of the sort. During the whole fortnight of Virginia's sojourn he had been on tenter-hooks — manœuvring to keep his son out of the way without seeming to do so.

They had — thanks, he felt sure, to his policy — arrived safely at the last day of Miss Mynors' stay. Last moments, however, are fraught with particular danger. Mr. Rosenberg could not feel that he was as yet "out of the wood," and would probably have undergone even worse apprehensions had he known of Gerald's appointment to meet the two girls at Hertford House and give them tea.

"If we hadn't arranged to meet Gerald here, I would just walk right away, out of the place," muttered Mims presently. "I wish that man would not dog us like this."

"Let us leave off looking at the pictures," suggested Virginia, "and go and sit at the top of the staircase, in that recess. Then we shall see Mr. Rosenberg as he comes up — and the man could hardly pursue us there without being openly offensive."

"Good!" replied Mims with satisfaction. They left the Boucher room, in which the stranger seemed to be absorbed in contemplation, and seated themselves in the alcove, behind the statue of "Triumphant Love."

They made a dainty picture in the fuller light which fell upon them there; and they sat on undisturbed until they saw the head of their escort appearing above the edge of the staircase.

Mims stood up and called to him, and in a moment he had joined them.

"Tired of the pictures already?" he asked, glancing at his watch. "I am not late, am I?"

"Oh, no, not a bit. We have only been here a very few minutes," replied his sister, noting that the lame man was now standing in the doorway, and that his eyes were fixed on Gerald.

"Read what is written round the pedestal of this statue, boy," she went on mischievously. "Is it true, or is it not?"

Gerald stooped over the words cut upon the circular base of the figure. He was not actually a handsome man, but he was, without doubt, distinguished-looking. Mr. Rosenberg senior prided himself upon the fact that his son's face showed no racial characteristics. His features were clean-cut, he was well-shaved and well-groomed, carried himself with dignity, and was usually self-possessed. He stood before the marble cupid, conscious in every nerve of the close proximity of his sister's beautiful friend, and read aloud the couplet:

Qui que tu sois, voici ton maître!
Il l'est, le fut, ou le doit être.

"Is it true, Gerald?" asked Mims naughtily. He looked at Virginia.

"Is it true, Miss Mynors?"

Virginia hesitated. "Well, I think it is, but not in the sense in which this inscription means it," she ventured timidly. "I mean — there is a love which is stronger than anything or anybody — but not *that* love — not that silly winged boy." She blushed a little as she spoke, and looked so divinely pretty, her small teeth just showing between the parted lips, her shadowy, Greuze eyes uplifted, that Gerald felt his head swim.

"I think you are right," he said, speaking with extra gravity to hide his emotion.

"Virgie is simply ridiculous about love," grumbled Mims. "She would give away her head, her heart, her hand, anything she had, for those she loves — her mother and her little sister ——"

"And Tony," reprovingly put in Virginia.

"And Tony," teased her friend. "Isn't she a baby, Gerald?"

The young man considered her. "Or an angel?" he suggested. There was, to him, something awe-inspiring in the simplicity of this girl. With a face that might have brought the world to her feet, she was absorbed in the domestic affections, untouched, as it would seem, by the admiration she excited.

"Well, as the car is down there waiting, we had better be off," remarked Mims, after a short interval in which she had left the two to talk together. "Are you going to take us to Fuller's, Gerald? If so, we ought to move on. You know we must dine early; we are going to the theatre for Virgie's last night."

The eyes of the man and the girl met, upon that, with mutual regret. Her last night! Cinderella must put off her dainty raiment and return to her saucepan-scouring, bed-making, account-keeping, making-ends-meet existence. The pang that shot through Gerald's heart was so like physical pain that he had a fanciful idea of the marble boy — the "Triumphant Love" who looked smiling down upon them — having shot his dart and reached the mark of his innermost feeling.

Could he let her go?

Like his father, he was a man of the world. Like his father, he had planned the alliance with birth and money which was to establish his position among English gentry. There was a sharp struggle in his mind. Had Virginia had one ounce of the coquette in her, she could have clinched the matter in five minutes.

The lame man, who had watched the whole colloquy, descended the stairs behind them in time to see the perfectly appointed motor in waiting, with its two men in livery. As he turned about and reascended to enter the galleries once more, there was a bitter sneer on his mouth, a look of active malevolence, as of one who deliberately turns his back upon his better feelings.

CHAPTER II

FATHER AND SON

"The wise sometimes from wisdom's ways depart:
Can youth then hush the dictates of the heart?
Precepts of prudence curb, but can't control
The fierce emotions of the flowing soul."— BYRON.

THE three young people, after partaking at Fuller's of an excellent tea, returned to Bryanston Square in good time to dress for dinner.

As they entered the house, Mr. Rosenberg emerged from his library on the ground floor, and called to Gerald, who, thus summoned, hung up his hat and walked into the dark, cool room where his father was seated at his roll-top desk, with a letter lying before him.

The elder man looked up at his only son with a kindly, half-rueful expression. "Gerald," he said, "I'm not as a rule tyrannical, and I think you will admit that I don't pry unduly into your affairs."

"I do admit it, father ——"

"Well, if I put a question which may seem to you unwarranted, I want you to understand that there is grave reason for it. The question is this. Is there any understanding between yourself and Miss Mynors?"

Gerald flushed, a slow, dark flush, as he seated himself near his father, his eyes on the ground. "No," he said quietly, "not as yet."

"Ha!" The shrewd, kindly eyes above the rims of the reading-glasses were fixed upon him. "That means that you might — eh, Gerald?"

The younger man did not at once reply. He seemed to be weighing carefully the thing he wished to say. At last:

"I am not a fool, father," he began, "and I have ambition, or I should be no son of yours. I should prefer to make a marriage which would establish me socially." Embarrassment made his phrasing somewhat stilted. "You will remember that when I first saw Miss Mynors, she was the daughter of a man with a county position. One assumed the adequate rent-roll that went with it."

"Yes, yes, my boy — I quite understand."

There was a pause. "She is far the most beautiful girl I ever saw," said Gerald at length.

"I grant it."

"She has also a beautiful disposition."

"H'mph!"

"Yes, it is so. Her birth being undeniable, and her beauty so great, I have been wondering whether — whether anything else that is within my reach could ever be as well worth having — could ever compensate me for her loss."

"In short, my able, intellectual son is preparing to consider the world well lost for love — eh?"

"I think, father, you will admit the temptation to do so in this case."

"I do," was the answer, in tones abrupt but heartfelt. "I don't mind owning that, during the past fortnight, while seeing whither you were drifting, I have been half-inclined to drift also in that direction. But, my boy, it won't do." He laid his clenched hand heavily on the desk before him. "I tell you plainly that it won't do. The girl is beautiful, I don't deny it. But she comes of a bad stock. Her mother is a woman whom I should describe as having no moral sense. They are beggars. You would have bound upon your back, for the term of your natural life, a ready-made family of three, none of whom, I dare

swear, will ever earn a farthing as long as they live. Just run your eye over that."

With a sudden twisting gesture he pushed a note, on lavender paper with a tiny, narrow black border, and scented with orris root, towards where his son sat. Gerald read:

LABURNUM VILLA, WAYHURST.

My dear, generous friend,

With your kindness to my Virginia already placing me under a burden of obligation to you, it must indeed seem to you that I stretch friendship to its utmost in writing to weary you with my troubles and to beseech advice. My excuses are, briefly, these: I know you to be an excellent man of business; and I know that you love my girl.

I will try not to be tiresome, and, indeed, the story of my misfortune, though dire, will not take long to tell. My poor husband — who, alas! had not your gift for finance — mortgaged our dear home during his lifetime. At his death, the debts on the estate swallowed up almost all other available money. We were obliged to let Lissendean, and to live upon the rent paid. I am quite unused to business, having lived, till my sad widowhood, so sheltered a life, and I forgot that if the payments were not kept up — the interest on the mortgage — I should lose the house altogether. Believe me, in our straitened circumstances, it was impossible to keep up the payments. Only yesterday have I heard from my solicitor that the mortgagee has foreclosed, and that we are left as destitute as though my husband had been a crossing-sweeper.

Can you suggest to me any means by which this trouble could be met? Is there any way of raising money by which I can stave off the utter ruin that threatens my helpless children? I turn to you as a last resort, and you will never know what it costs my pride to let you into the secret

of our misery. Do not tell my darling child until her visit is over — let her have her happy, happy moments with you undimmed. I can break the bad news to her to-morrow, upon her return — or later, should you by any chance wish her to extend her visit.— I am, dear Mr. Rosenberg, your sorely tried friend,

VIRGINIA MYNORS.

The dark colour deepened upon Gerald's face as he read this letter. He laid it down with a gesture of distaste, and made no audible comment.

His father, looking sympathetically at him, tapped the paper with his broad finger-tips. "Gerald," he said, "that woman is a humbug, through and through. It is the letter of a cadger. Look at it — written on paper that cost exactly ten times what her note-paper ought to cost. Little things like that tell one a lot. No doubt everything else is on the same scale. I expect they are up to their necks in debt. What can I do with that letter, except send the writer ten pounds and regret my inability to help her further? Nobody could help her. But I tell you plainly, my son — if I can prevent it, as God's above us, that woman shall never be your mother-in-law."

He did not speak violently, but judicially, as one summing up a case.

"I went down there once, you may remember, for a week-end, while they were still at Lissendean," he continued. "I took her measure then. She is a woman who would fleece any man who could be got to admire her. She is that type. You think the girl is different. I tell you that what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh. The girl isn't to be trusted any more than the mother. You see the position — absolutely destitute! Three of them! What is to happen? Say you marry — say you allow her two or three hundred a year — that's

going to cripple you, and it isn't going to keep her." He spoke with ever-increasing urgency. "If you give her three, she'll spend five. If you give her five, she'll spend eight. Can't you see that for yourself, Gerald? It's all in that letter — every word of it — if you read between the lines."

"It's a contemptible letter," said Gerald, pushing back his chair abruptly; "but I can't believe that the girl ——"

"Gerald, put it to yourself a moment. Even if the girl is the best girl in the world, are you prepared to keep the lot? Virginia's very qualities — her love for her family, her generosity where they are concerned — would be your ruin. You couldn't say no to her; she couldn't say no to them. There you would all be."

Gerald's face hardened. His likeness to his father came out clearly — breaking, as it were, through the polish of his public school and university training. He saw the case with the Rosenberg eye, and he flinched.

"But how," he stammered, and cleared his throat, "how am I to draw back with honour, father?"

"I've done that for you. That is, the way out is open if you will take it. The Liverpool house wrote me this morning, asking to have you sent down for a week — some bother about that inspector, Routledge; you know the man. I wired to the hotel that you might come on by the night train. It may fairly be called urgent. My counsel to you is that you just bolt — bolt and get clear away before you have committed yourself to a thing which must be hopeless."

Gerald leaned forward, covering his face with his hands. It was a very rare sign of feeling with him.

"You haven't committed yourself — you haven't said or done anything that makes it impossible to draw back?" asked the elder man in deep anxiety. "You said you hadn't."

"That is true. I have said nothing. I am not even certain what her answer would be. I could not say that she had given me any reason to hope. She is so serene, so impartially sweet, one cannot tell — like my 'Last Duchess,' you know —' who passed without much the same smile'?"

Mr. Rosenberg did not read Browning. The allusion passed him by.

"Then take your courage in your two hands, boy, and do as I tell you. In a month or two you'll be thanking me on your knees. Bolt, I tell you, bolt. Don't see her again. Leave a message by me — catch the restaurant-train. I told Brown to pack your valise, and the car is waiting."

Gerald was pale now. "She'll think me a cur."

"No such thing. I shall make good your case. Urgency. She will think you could not help yourself. She will look upon the affair as hung up, not ended. After a while she will forget it."

"But — but what are they to do?" stammered Gerald. "The mother may deserve this, but she doesn't. It is she who will have to suffer."

"She shall not suffer. I will send them enough to carry on, and I will recommend that wax doll of a mother to take a situation — to go as companion to some heiress or something — to put her shoulder to the wheel and help to keep her children. She has had a good run for her money, now let her taste the rough side of things for a while. Do her no harm. Do her good."

Gerald rose and went to the window, gazing out with unseeing eyes at the busy welter of society traffic — the swift cars, laden with well-dressed occupants, which flashed by in the summer evening.

His father watched him anxiously.

"Gerald," he said at last, "listen to me. If you go

now — if you do as I tell you — there need be nothing final about it. The girl will be at Wayhurst — you will know where to find her. Suitors are not likely to be as common as blackberries, even with her looks. Take this chance to think things over more coolly than is possible when she is in the same house with you. I don't want to demand too great a sacrifice, boy ——"

The last words were husky and wistful. He loved his son sincerely.

Gerald swung round. "You have me beat, as the Irish say," he muttered abruptly. "I know I'm not master of myself. If I speak to her, it might be against my better judgment; I might regret it. You are right — it is better to temporise, to postpone a decision. Yes, it is better — I am almost sure."

He spoke absently, jerkily. In his mind was one of those pictures which rise unbidden — and apparently without reason — to the memory. It was the picture of the face of a man he had remarked that afternoon at the Wallace collection, standing in the doorway of the Boucher room, as the Rosenberg party went downstairs. The man had a noticeable face — dark, with an expression in the eyes which brought to mind the word "smouldering."

He had watched the gay little party of three with an air that was like Mephistopheles sneering at Faust. "So! You are snared — snared like other men, by a pretty face and luminous eyes ——"

That was what the silent watcher had conveyed to the prosperous young suitor.

Oddly, the recollection of his face, swimming all unaware into the field of memory, turned the scale.

"Yes, father, I shall go," said Gerald.

. . . . . .

"Why, where's Jerry?" demanded Mims, as she and Virginia entered the drawing-room, and proceeded to greet

a couple of young men, who stood there with the before-I-have-dined expression upon their clean faces. "How do you do, Lawrence? How do you do, Mr. Bent? I expect our box will hold five."

"I telephoned Bent an hour ago, Mims," said Mr. Rosenberg. "Poor old Gerald has had a stroke of bad luck. I have been obliged to send him away."

Mims paused in consternation, and, as though she could not help it, her glance flew to Virginia. "To send him away? Why, where?" she cried blankly.

Virginia, more in reply to the glance than as a result of the news, coloured divinely. She had put on her very sweetest gown. It was a survival of Lissendean days, carefully altered by the finger of genius, so that it looked to be the very latest. It was pale blue, with touches of faint periwinkle mauve: and young Bent, as he gazed, was trying to decide which colour matched her eyes more nearly.

She was hurt. The news wounded. She had spent this fairy fortnight in luxury and also in a dream of happiness. She had not singled out Gerald as anything more than one factor in her bliss. He was just a part of a scheme of things which must be injured by any interference.

So unconscious was she of any deeper significance, that she turned at once to Mr. Rosenberg, lifting to him the eyes that even he found a difficulty in resisting, and cried impulsively :

"Do you mean that Gerald is gone — that I shall not see him again before I leave?"

"Why, if you are leaving in course of the next few days, I fear not," said the hypocrite. "He was not pleased, as you may imagine. But business is sometimes urgent, you know. Had he not gone, I must have done so myself: and he thought a night journey to Liverpool rather

much to expect from a man of my age who had a son to send. Eh?"

"Of course," murmured Virginia. "But it is a pity! Spoils our last evening!"

"Oh, now, now, Miss Virginia! That is a little rough upon poor Bent, who has rallied up at a moment's notice to make your party complete. Confess now — in the lamentable circumstances, could I have done better? Eh? I think not. There is dinner announced. Come, take my arm. Mims must divide herself between the two young men."

CHAPTER III

VIRGINIA AT HOME

"Learn, by a mortal yearning, to ascend,
Seeking a higher object. Love was given,
Encouraged, sanctioned, chiefly for that end,
That self might be annulled — her bondage prove
The fetters of a dream, opposed to Love!"

— WORDSWORTH.

THE six-forty-six express from London swept majestically into the station at Wayhurst.

It was one of the events of the day in the sleepy place — the arrival of the 6.46; the evening papers came down on that train. Many residents were on the platform — the retired Army men to fetch their *Pall Mall Gazette*, others to meet friends. There was nobody to meet Virginia Mynors, but evidently she did not expect it. She stood among the throng, in her simplest linen suit, and searched with her eyes for the outside porter. It was some time before she could secure his services — he was busy with more important clients — and when at last he had shouldered her trunk and hat-box, it was with the remark that he couldn't "promise to be out at the villas, not much afore nine o'clock, at any rate."

Virginia intimated that nine o'clock would suit, and turned, travelling-bag and umbrella-case in hand, to brave her hot walk. It was a sultry evening. The country town was bathed in dust; the roads, though it was almost seven o'clock, seemed shadeless. After a while the girl stopped to withdraw her sunshade from the case, and proceeded on her way, holding it up with one hand, the weight of her hand-luggage in the other.

She looked pale and dispirited. Somehow, the end of her glorious London visit had tailed off in dissatisfaction. The Rosenbergs had been kind — most kind — to the last. They had insisted upon keeping her one day longer, that Mr. Bent might take them to Hendon to see some flying. But longer than that she would not stay, for Pansy, her little lame sister, had written her a letter containing the following disquieting news:

Mama is in an awfull stayt. I think she has had bad news. She says we are rewend.

This last word Virginia interpreted "ruined," and as she plodded along the High Street, and up the Balchurch Road, past Sycamore Terrace and its handsome houses, to the region of tiny villas, these words were haunting her. She had supposed their ruin already accomplished. What could have happened afresh? What had mamma been doing? Incurring debts which she could not pay? This she was constantly doing upon a small scale, in spite of the fact that her daughter rigorously supervised her cheque-book and controlled the household expenditure.

Virginia took it for granted that her mother would always spend more than she ought, and was quite used to depriving herself of necessaries in order to provide mamma with such small luxuries as expensive soap, note-paper, perfume, a library subscription, and so on. Graver expenditure than this she had not anticipated; but she was blaming herself for having yielded to the imploring desire of Mims that she should go to London, and her mother's eager advocacy of the plan. She ought not to have left mamma to the management of anything; she knew it. She was prepared to find the weekly expenses doubled, but she had still a couple of sovereigns in her purse with which she hoped to meet this deficiency.

As she moved along in the heat, laden and depressed, her face assumed an aspect of anxiety which altered it surprisingly. Seen thus, it was obvious that she was not merely slender, but sadly thin: hollows were discernible in the cheeks, shadows lurked around the smiling mouth when it was grave.

At last Laburnum Villa was reached.

With a sigh of relief Virginia trod the tiny garden approach, pushed open the narrow door, and deposited her burdens within the passage.

The passage was extremely small. It was distempered in pale green (Virginia had distempered it), and the paint was white (Virginia had enamelled it). The floor was stained (Virginia had stained it), and on the ground there lay a very valuable old Persian corridor-rug, relic of Lissendean. From Lissendean, too, came the marble fountain-head which was used for umbrellas, and the little carved oak table.

Cinderella's expression changed as she entered her home — changed to an eager, glowing delight of anticipation. Light-footed she ran up the tiny staircase, and, pushing open the door of the back room on the landing, flew to the side of a child who lay almost flat upon an invalid-couch at the open window.

There were ecstatic cries: "Virgie, Virgie!" and "Pansy, my Pansy blossom!" and the two sisters were clinging together in a rapture of affection.

"Let's look at you, Virgie, darling! Oh, yes, you are better! It has done you good, hasn't it, dear? Plenty to eat — you never have enough at home."

"Pansy, Pansy, what nonsense you talk, you silly baby! Of course I always have plenty to eat! The point is, how have *you* been getting on? Has old Mrs. Brown fed you properly?"

Pansy was able to reassure her. The "supply" had

been quite satisfactory. "Only she said she thought the missus didn't ought to expect no general to do up her boots for her, and mend her stockings," remarked the child. "I told her to give mamma's stockings to me — you know her darning was abominable. Mamma would never have worn them afterwards if she had done them. She grumbles enough as it is at having to wear darned stockings at all. Mrs. Brown is quite a kind old thing. She is staying to-night until eight o'clock to get supper, so that you should not have to set to work the moment you come home."

"That's a relief," owned Virginia, fetching a deck-chair and seating herself with her arms behind her head. "Where is mamma now?"

"She's still out, I think. I haven't heard her come in. She went this afternoon to call upon Major and Mrs. Simpson, and to buy some things to trim up a hat."

"Oh, but she doesn't want another hat ——" began Virgie in vexation, and checked herself. "I only trimmed her a new one the day I left home."

"Well, somebody sent her some money yesterday, I think," replied Pansy. "She went this morning and bought herself a winter coat at Baxter's sale. She said it was an economy."

"And when the winter comes, she'll say it's out of date," replied Virgie with a little groan. "Oh dear, I do wish she wouldn't do things like that — with poor Tony's suit almost in rags."

"Well, you know it is no use for me to say anything, don't you, dear?" remarked Pansy, with the quaintest assumption of wisdom.

She would have been a pretty child but for her look of transparent, egg-shell frailness. Her hair, with bronze lights in it, clustered charmingly about her small face, and her eyes were as lovely as Virginia's own, but with the

haggard, hungry expression of a child who has no health.

She was very small for her age, which was twelve. Her lameness was the result of a bad accident in babyhood. Mr. and Mrs. Mynors spent a winter on the Riviera, leaving their children in charge of a nurse who was not trustworthy. Mrs. Mynors had been warned that the nurse was flighty, but had taken no notice of the caution. She wished to set out on a certain date, and said she had no time to make other arrangements. The woman went out for what is now known as a "joy-ride" with the chauffeur and other chosen companions. She took with her Pansy, who was the baby, and Bernard, the elder boy, who was her favourite, leaving Tony at home in charge of Virginia. The party refreshed itself at many taverns on the way, and it was hardly surprising that the affair ended in a serious accident. Bernard was killed, and the baby's spine was injured.

The shock of his eldest son's loss was thought to have been the source of Mr. Mynors' own lingering illness. He had forgiven his wife many a flirtation, much consistent neglect of himself. He never forgave her for Bernard's death.

Nine-year-old Virginia waited, all that terrible day, and part of the night, for the return of the motoring party. Old Brand, the butler, who had been with the Mynors from the time of her father's boyhood, and who had begged his mistress not to leave this nurse in charge of the children, sat hour after hour with Virginia on his lap, until, at ten o'clock, he carried her up to bed, left her in charge of the under-nurse, and himself went out with one or two gardeners to see if he could hear news of the motor-party.

Virginia, though in bed, could not sleep. She lay listening, listening for a sound in the silent house, until the dawn began to break. Then she heard wheels — wheels

and voices on the gravel of the drive; and, slipping from her bed, without arousing the fast-sleeping nursemaid or Tony, she ran downstairs in her white nightie.

All her life she would remember Brand's face as he strode into the hall and laid down upon a settle the burden that he carried — Bernard, with his head all shrouded in white linen. Then came a doctor, stern and tight-lipped, with the moaning baby in his arms. Virginia could still recall the carbolic smell of the doctor's clothes as he went upstairs, the blueness of the baby's face in its waxen stillness, and the silence punctuated by faint moans.

The grim realities of life came then to the girl's consciousness for the first time, never to leave her more. For some years — until she went to the school at which she met Miriam Rosenberg — she was grave and silent with a gravity unbefitting her years, her fine health, her promising future. After that she yielded to the spell of youth and friendship and adventure, and the world had seemed ever more alluring, until the final shock of her father's loss.

This hot afternoon, gazing down upon Pansy's pathetic fragility, she thought what sorrows had been hers in the twenty years of her short life. The future looked sadder than usual, and her customary good cheer was temporarily absent; she felt a curious depression, or sense of coming trouble.

"You look so grave, Virgie darling!"

"Pansy, I'm a perfect pig. I believe I am suffering from that horrible feeling we used to call 'after-the-party' feeling."

"I don't wonder," replied Pansy sagely. "It must be pretty rotten to come back from all that fun and luxury and money to start being maid of all work again. Oh, Virgie, what are we to do?"

"Do? Why, get on, of course — do our work and

enjoy it!" cried Virginia, springing up and going to the window. "Oh, Pansy, the delphiniums! How this hot weather has brought them out! There was not one in bloom when I left."

"I thought you'd be pleased with that!" cried the child in eager delight. "And look at the roses too, Virgie — the Hiawatha that you thought was dead!"

"Darling Hiawatha! He came from home," whispered Virginia. She knelt by the window, her elbows on the sill and her curved chin resting on her hands, while her Greuze eyes rested on the row of little garden plots, on the farther row that abutted upon them, and on the backs of the houses beyond those. She was young, it was summer-time, and yet, and yet ——

"Well," said Pansy, "did Gerald send me his love or anything?"

Virginia started. Gerald at the moment filled her thoughts. She had missed him when he went away — went away without a word! She had not expected to miss him so much. Yet, with the lack of perception of her youth, she failed to connect her present formless dejection with the thought of his departure.

Pulling herself together with a determined effort, she turned from the window, explained to Pansy the fact that Gerald had been obliged to rush off to Liverpool for his father, and thus had naturally not had time for any special message or present. "But I have got something for you, sweetums," she murmured caressingly. "You wait until the outside porter condescends to deliver my boxes! You only wait!"

The colour flooded the cripple's transparent skin. "Oh, Virgie, Virgie, what is it? Tell me what it is!"

"We'll make it a guessing game," replied Virgie. "I will just go and get on some old things, and we will play it properly. Where's Tony, by the way?"

"Gone with the eleven to play Balchurch. Did you know they have made him twelfth man? He's awfully bucked," said Pansy, with satisfaction. "I don't expect he'll be back yet."

"Oh! Pansy! but how splendid! He's very young, isn't he?"

"Two years younger than the youngest man in the eleven," announced Pansy, with satisfaction. "I'm making him a tie in the school colours." She took up her knitting with pride.

A sound in the hall below struck Virginia's ear. "There's mamma," she said; "I must go and greet her."

Slipping out of the room, she descended the stairs, and entering the tiny drawing-room on the right of the entrance passage, stood face to face with Mrs. Mynors.

It was hard to believe that these were mother and daughter; they looked more like sisters. The elder woman, in coquettish slight mourning, had the same face, broad at the brow, tapering at the chin, the same long lovely eyes, deep-lashed, the same poise of the head and wavy golden-brown hair. A close observer alone would mark differences. The elder woman's eyes were blue, like forget-me-nots — the hard blue that looks so soft, that never varies. Her daughter's were less easy to describe. They were changeful as the sea, responsive to varying skies; and just now, in the waning light, they seemed dark grey.

"Well, my chick, how are you? I was having tea with the Simpsons and forgot the time, or I should have been back before this. You are looking better for your change! I'm glad I persuaded you to go, though we get on pretty badly without you." Passing keen eyes over her daughter's face she seated herself, slightly drawing up her skirt with a motion which intimated that she expected to have her shoes untied.

Unhesitatingly Virginia knelt upon the ground and performed this service. The little room in which they were was a bower of luxury. In it were collected all the relics of their vanished past which Mrs. Mynors had thought herself unable to do without. Silver, miniatures, cushions, foot-stools, a soft couch, an empire writing-table. It was like the tiny boudoir of a rich woman. Its owner cast a disgusted glance about her, as she remarked: "Charwomen never will dust, will they?"

"Oh, I hoped you would have dusted this room yourself, just while I was away," replied Virginia, with a sigh, casting her housewifely eye upon the tarnished silver. It was a room which would take a good hour a day to keep in proper order.

"Well, Virgie, have you any news for me?" asked Mrs. Mynors presently, in her voice of tantalising sweetness.

Virginia raised her eyes, puzzled by something in the voice. "News?" she answered wonderingly. "Nothing very special. I told you most of it in my letters. The flying yesterday was most interesting — quite worth staying for."

Mrs. Mynors sat meditatively, while her daughter left the room, went upstairs, found indoor shoes and brought them down. She then carefully pulled the pins from the becoming hat and removed it, her mother sitting in calm acquiescence the while. Mrs. Mynors was uneasy. Her reading between the lines in Virginia's innocent letters had certainly led her to conclude that Gerald Rosenberg meant to marry the girl. Had she herself made a fatal mistake in sending that letter to Gerald's father before the matter had been clinched? She had felt doubts, but her dire need had driven her on. Now she was wondering how to find words in which to convey to Virginia the blow which had descended.

Virginia always divided the money. Each quarter she had apportioned to her mother the sum for the interest on the mortgage. There had always been something else on which that money must be spent.

What would Virgie say when she knew that Lissendean had gone, vanished; that they would never revisit it; that Tony could never come into his inheritance?

Far though she was from any feeling of self-blame, she yet was conscious of discomfort as she looked at her daughter's unsuspecting face.

It was easy to decide not to spoil Virgie's first evening at home by bad news. Leaving her daughter to carry her hat, gloves and sunshade to the room above, she settled herself luxuriously by the open window, with her feet up, and plunged into temporary forgetfulness in the pages of a very exciting novel.

Meanwhile — the outside porter proving better than his word — the trunk arrived and was unpacked. The enraptured Pansy found herself mistress of a doll of almost inconceivable beauty, with jointed limbs, and a body that could be washed in real water. Mims had added a chest of drawers, and various articles of costume. The dressing and undressing of dolls had always been the little cripple's one joy. And never had she hoped to possess such a doll as this.

Then Tony came home, hot and exultant, looking such a fine boy in his flannels and blazer. His team had beaten the other after a hard fight, during which, of course, the umpire had given an l.b.w., grossly unfair and in favour of the rival eleven.

He received his own present very graciously — a curious collection of oddments it seemed to the unlearned; but he had marked what he wanted in a catalogue, and his sister had obediently bought as directed. Contrite wheels,

eccentrics, female screws, and so on, were darkness to her mind, but pure joy to the recipient.

Her gift to her mother — a pair of really nice gloves — was also accepted graciously, though with an absence of enthusiasm which led Virginia to suspect that other things, besides the winter coat, had been purchased that morning at Baxter's sale. Who could have sent money to her mother? She could think of nobody; for the men friends who had hovered continually about Lissendean had never penetrated to Laburnum Villa. Mamma, however, made no confidence, and could not, of course, be questioned.

It came to be time for Mrs. Brown to depart. Mamma had no silver, and asked Virgie to pay her off. The young housekeeper then felt at liberty to go and survey her kitchen premises, and to heave deep sighs at the sight of so many dirty pots and pans, and the inevitable brown patch burnt upon the enamel of her favourite milk-saucepan.

CHAPTER IV

THE TWO VIRGINIAS

"But hadst thou — Oh, with that same perfect face,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And that same voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's note, and follows to the snare! —
Hadst thou, with these the same, but brought a mind!"
— R. Browning.

Nobody who saw Virginia next morning, in her blue linen overall, bringing up her mother's early morning tea, would have recognised the dainty flower of luxury who had moved over the polished floors of the galleries of Hertford House. She put the tray beside the bed, drew back the curtains, and brought in the hot water, just as a housemaid might have done. Mrs. Mynors, rosy and beautiful among her pillows, rubbed her sleepy eyes, and murmured "Thank you, dear one!" in a perfunctory manner, stretching her white arms luxuriously, and adding fretfully: "Another grilling day!"

Virginia returned no answer to this comment, but withdrew to the kitchen, where Tony sat munching his fried bread and bacon and drinking his coffee with a schoolboy's appetite. When he had been despatched, clean and ready for his day's work, there was Pansy's breakfast to be thought of. Dainty toast, fresh tea, a spoonful of jam, were arranged on a pretty tray and carried upstairs. Then Virginia was at leisure to sit down for a few minutes, drink what was left of the coffee in Tony's pot, and eat some bread-and-butter. In truth she had little appetite. The

heat sapped her strength, and she reflected sadly that it was a mistake to go away.

A holiday made it harder to begin again.

From the moment of finishing her breakfast till the moment of laying lunch, she never ceased from her labours. The kitchen had to be thoroughly scrubbed before its dainty mistress could be friends with it again. Then there were beds to make, a room to sweep, three rooms to dust. Then her mother came down, drank a cup of Bovril, and settled herself in the garden with some embroidery, while Virginia went up to make her bed and do her room.

When lunch had been cleared and washed up, the drudge had an hour's breathing space. She spent it lying upon the bed in Pansy's room, the little cripple having been moved as usual to her invalid couch by the window. Virginia was so tired that she herself felt alarmed. What was to become of them all if her health were to give way? The thought was too horrible to be dwelt upon.

Her mother, remarking the depression of her spirits, was vexed. She could not help wishing that Virginia were not quite such a simpleton. If she had had an ounce of the coquette in her, she could have secured Gerald Rosenberg, and all would have been well. Mrs. Mynors had refrained from any kind of hint when the girl went to London in response to Miriam's urgent invitation. She thought her hint might defeat itself. Now she was wondering whether, in view of her daughter's obtuseness, she would not have done well to let her know what was expected of her. She could see that the girl was out of heart, and she shrank, partly from cowardice, partly from affection, from dealing the final blow. Yes, her utter selfishness notwithstanding, Mrs. Mynors had some affection for Virginia. She misunderstood the girl, and undervalued her; she accepted all her burnt offerings and sacrifices as manifestly her own due; yet she trusted

and leaned upon her with all the weight of her own empty egotism.

Next morning, when the little figure in its blue overall brought in the tea, there was a business-like letter lying upon the tray.

Mrs. Mynors did not open it until she had enjoyed her tea, for it was from the solicitors who had foreclosed the mortgage, and well she knew that it was not likely to contain anything that would please her.

She lay for some time — after she had eaten and drunk — glancing at the morning paper, and trying to determine to face the necessary unpleasantness. At last, heaving a sigh of boundless self-pity, she took the envelope in her pretty white hands and opened it.

As she read a sudden flush mounted to her very brow. A smothered exclamation broke from her. She was seized with trembling, her heart beat suffocatingly, and with a bound she sprang from bed, rushed to her mirror, and stood there, surveying with sparkling eyes the image of Virginia Mynors at the age of forty-one.

Oh, did the mirror lie, or was it true that she was very nearly as pretty as ever? Hardly a silver thread in the beautiful ripe gold hair that had no slightest hint of red in it! The teeth still perfect within the pretty lips, barely discernible crows' feet at the corners of the brilliant, expressive eyes! Plumper she was no doubt, but to be plump prevents wrinkles. As she stood there, even in her disarray, she knew that she did not deceive herself. She was still a most attractive woman.

. . . And fate had sent her a chance like this! With pulses racing she crept back to her bed and curled up there, trying to decide how best to take advantage of this marvellous coincidence, this strange turn of fortune's wheel. What a good thing that she was a woman of experience, no longer a shy girl. She must not lose this

chance, as silly Virginia had lost hers! No, no! She was too clever for that. How well the French wit had said: "*Si la jeunesse savait! Si la vieillesse pouvait!*"

In herself, the two states of youth and age were met felicitously. She was old enough to know, young enough to enjoy! If she could not now take hold on circumstance, and wrest her defeat into pure victory, then she was no better than a fool — and she had never thought herself that.

All the time she was dressing her lips would part in a smile that revealed those pretty teeth, and a dimple which still lurked in a fold of her smooth cheek. She passed her own plans in review before her mind, pondering — pondering as to how much she would have to tell Virgie. Her excitement was so great that she felt sure she would have to tell most of it. Thrills of anticipation coursed most agreeably through her being. How had she been able to bear it so far — this crushing, stifling existence in an odious little box in a horrid third-rate town? How patient she had been! What a martyrdom she had borne! For the children it was of course different. For her it had been a living burial. Now that it was over — now that she saw a shining gateway admitting her back to the world she loved so well, it seemed incredible that she could have stood it so long.

. . . What would Virgie say now — Virgie, who was always so mean and stingy, reproving her for gratifying even the simplest taste, expecting her to live as though she had been brought up in one of the cottages on her husband's estate? She pictured the rapture of gratitude and devotion with which the girl would realise that her mother's charm, her mother's ability to hold a man's affection for twenty years and more, was to mend the family fortunes. She faced — only to disregard it — the fact that Virginia would have some ridiculous scruples about her father's

memory. She recollected very soon that, for Pansy's sake, the girl would welcome any way out — Pansy, whose lameness might be cured, if she could only have the required advice and treatment.

She sat before her glass in a dream of reminiscence.

There was a tap at the door, and her daughter entered, soft-footed, carrying a cup on a tray. "I've brought your cold beef-tea jelly, dearest, as it is such a hot day," said she, putting it down. "Would you like me to do your hair for you?"

"Oh, my chick, if you only would! I feel quite overstrained! I have had such extraordinary — such heart-searching news! I very nearly fainted when I was having my bath."

Virginia turned pale. The remembrance of Pansy's revelation concerning their "rewend" condition leapt to her mind. She had now been home three days, and her mother had said nothing of it, but seemed flush of cash. Virginia had consulted the cheque-book — nothing out of the way there. The money spent on house-keeping had been, as she expected, too large, but not out of all bounds.

Something had stolen Virginia's buoyancy. She felt an inward flinching, as though she could not bear a fresh blow. It must be the heat. She took up a silver brush, and said, as stoutly as she could:

"Well, Mums, tell me all about it. I can bear it."

Mrs. Mynors pushed aside her golden tresses, opened a small drawer, searched it, and drew out the solicitor's letter.

"Virgie, I could not tell you the very day you came home," she faltered. "It would have been brutal, but I suppose you must know."

Her daughter, taking the legal-looking documents in her suddenly cold hands, sank rather than seated herself

upon a chair, for the humiliating reason that she felt unable to stand.

There was stillness for a while in the tiny room, which, like the drawing-room downstairs, was a bower of luxury. Carpet, curtains, furniture, plenishings — all were costly relics of bygone days, something to make a pillow between the dainty head of its mistress and the hard cold boards of poverty. Even as she cleaned the silver toilet articles yesterday, Virgie had noted a fresh bottle of a particularly expensive perfume affected by her mother.

Now she read the letters — read the family doom.

All gone! Everything! Lissendean! . . .

She put her hands to her head. She must think.

What was left?

Nothing! They were paupers. Tony must leave school and begin to be an errand boy. She, Virginia, must go into service. Pansy must be got into a home for cripples! Her mother? . . .

. . . And she had gone without the necessities of life to keep up those payments, while Mrs. Mynors was squandering the money on petty luxuries!

For the moment passion surged up so strongly in Virginia that she had to clench her hands and grind her teeth, while she shook with the effort to refrain from telling the pretty, golden-haired doll once for all what she thought of her. This mother, whom she had loved, whom dad had loved! Almost his last words had been a plea to his daughter not to let her mother suffer if she could help it.

Had she not done her best? What more could have been required of her that she had not given? She had sacrificed her whole life to the service of her loved ones, had drudged and toiled that her mother might have ease, had listened to her grumbling complaints, had humoured her wilfulness. Yet all had been in vain. In vain!

To her mother's consternation, and even annoyance, Virginia slipped off her chair in a dead faint.

With a sense of acute injury at being called upon to render such service, the plump, useless hands succeeded in lowering the girl to the floor. Then, still resentful, Mrs. Mynors actually got a wet sponge and laid it on her daughter's forehead. This not succeeding, she found *eau-de-Cologne* and applied that. After a time Virginia slowly returned to life, and to a knowledge of the enormity of her behaviour. She dragged herself to her mother's bed, and lay down there until her swimming senses should readjust themselves.

They were ruined; and her mother was buying winter coats and bottles of perfume! It was really laughable.

"You cannot reproach me, really, Virgie," said her mother presently, speaking with sad submissiveness from out her cloud of hair. "You must see that I could not help spending that money, and also that I never dreamed what would be the result of getting behindhand with my payments. Our own lawyer ought to have warned me. I consider him much to blame in the matter."

Virginia had nothing at all to say.

"I can see that you do blame me!" sharply cried Mrs. Mynors. "You lie there without a word of comfort — as if I had ruined you and not myself too! I suppose it is as hard for me as for you."

Virgie turned her face over and hid it on the pillow.

After gazing at her for some time, in a mood which accusing conscience made bitter, Mrs. Mynors decided to play her trump card.

"You need not put on all these airs of tragic despair, Virgie. I have told you the bad news first. This morning I have had other news — the most extraordinary thing here — the most unlikely coincidence — that you ever heard!

Do you want me to tell you about it, or are you too ill to pay any attention?"

Virgie made an effort and sat up. "I'm so sorry, mother. It was very sudden, you know, and it is all so horrible — like falling over a precipice. I felt as if I could not grasp it. I am better now."

She slipped off the bed and tottered to the window, leaning out into the air. "Please tell me — everything," she begged.

Mrs. Mynors leaned forward, and a little, mischievous smile showed her dimple, as she said, playing nervously with the articles in her manicure set: "Did you ever hear me speak of the man I was once engaged to — the man I jilted to marry your father — Mr. Gaunt?"

"I believe I have," replied Virginia, knitting her brows.

"It was a tiresome affair," went on the lady, with a sigh. "He was very young and impetuous; perhaps that is putting it too mildly; he had a shocking temper, and he didn't take his jilting at all peaceably. I know I was in fault, but what is a girl to do? He was a mere boy. When I promised to marry him I had never seen your father; and you know, Virgie darling, how irresistible he was."

"Yes. I know," said Virginia, telling herself that, after all, her mother must have loved the dead man better than had appeared. Yet why, if she loved him so much, had there always been so many others? Virginia recalled the familiar figures — Colonel Duke, and Major Gibson, the M.F.H., and Sir Edmund Hobbs. Certainly, for the last two years of his life Bernard Mynors had been unable to escort his wife himself. If she hunted, it must be with others. It had, in fact, been with others.

The dainty lips curved into a yet broader smile. "Poor Gaunt! It seems that he has never married," went on the

musical voice. "He was too madly in love, I suppose, for any transfer of his affections to be possible. But the point of it all is this. I have this morning heard that it is he who holds the mortgage on our property. Lissendean belongs to him!"

Virginia's big, woful eyes opened very wide.

"I heard this morning from the lawyers that he is in London for a week or two, and wants to get the business finished off. I have made my little plan. I mean to go up to town and see him, Virgie."

The words brought Virginia to her feet. "To go and see him?"

"Yes. I must, for my children's sake, make an appeal to his kindness of heart. The pain I caused him must long ago have been forgotten, and if I can only procure an interview with him, I feel very little doubt of being able to persuade him to allow us more time."

Virginia considered. "Do you think he will see you? It might be very painful for him. Have you heard nothing of him since your marriage?"

"Nothing. He lives in the country now, it seems. He must have inherited the place that belonged to his old great-aunts. He always used to tell me that there was not much chance of his coming into it. He was a fine fellow in his way, only difficult — so jealous, for one thing. However, it would be most interesting to meet him. I wonder"— coquettishly —"if he will know me again. I don't fancy that I have changed much."

"Very little, I should think," said Virgie; "the miniature that father had done of you the first year you were married is still just like you."

Mrs. Mynors smiled brightly. She was beginning to recover her good humour. "Unless he has altered strangely, he will not be cruel to the widow and the fatherless," she murmured pensively. "Cheer up, Virgie,

all is not yet lost. Try to be a little hopeful, dear child."

Virginia sat, twisting her hands together, turning the matter over in her mind. Her mother's creditor was her mother's old lover. Her mother was going to seize this fact, and make the most of it. Something in Virginia revolted from the idea; but she could not urge her objections. She fixed her purple-grey eyes upon the gay face in the mirror. It might have been that of a woman without a care. Every instinct in her mother was kindled at the idea of once more encountering, and most probably conquering, what had been hers once, and would turn to her again.

A step-father! That was an idea to make one wince. With all the ingrained fidelity of her simple nature, the girl hated the thought. Yet, after all, what was the alternative?

She felt that the family fortunes had passed beyond her own power to adjust or alter. As long as a foothold of dry ground remained she had, as it were, protected these dear ones from the raging flood. Now that the tide had swept them away, and they were all tossing on the waters, could she object to her mother's seizing a rope — any rope — that might be flung to them?

"I suppose he knows," she said, after a long pause, "he knows that it is you?"

"I suppose so. These coincidences are very curious. I have never seen him, never even heard of him, since our rupture." She reflected, her chin on her hand. "Strange that he should have inherited money," she observed. "He was not at all well off when I knew him, though he was very ambitious. He wrote — essays and so on for the Press. He was certainly clever. Twenty-two years since I last saw him! How strange it seems! I used to be afraid at first that he might try to kill me or your father.

He was so violent. At our wedding we had special police arrangements. But nothing happened. Nothing at all." She spoke as if the fact were slightly disappointing.

"It is a chance," sighed out Virginia at length. "If you can bear it, mother — if it is not asking too much of you to go and beg a favour from a man you once treated badly, then I think you had better try."

Mrs. Mynors' mouth drooped at the corners, and her face took on the sweetest look of resignation. "Virgie, dearest, you can fancy — you can understand something of what it will cost me. But for my children's sakes I must put my own feelings aside. I must go and see what I can do. Let me see! Where — how could I meet him? A solicitor's office does not lend itself. Oh, Virgie, I have it! What a comfort, what a piece of good luck, that I became a life-member of the 'Sportswoman' three years ago! I will ask him to meet me there! I will write a note, to be given to him direct; and I don't think he will refuse. If he does, I will just go to London and take him by storm. I vow I'll see him somehow! Leave it to me, Virgia! You shall see what I can do. When my children's bread is at stake, no effort shall be too great, no sacrifice too difficult."

. . . . . .

Later on, when Virginia had done her hair to perfection, and gone away to do the house-work, Mrs. Mynors took a chair, mounted it, and unlocked a small drawer at the top of her tall-boy. There were several bundles of letters and papers in the drawer, and a small jewel-case containing a ring. She searched among the papers for one loose envelope, addressed in a forcible, small but not cramped handwriting.

She sat down, with this letter and the ring-box upon her knee, and read:

You make a mistake. It is not the transfer of your affections from myself to Mynors of which I complain, for this has not taken place. What has happened is simply that you have bartered yourelf for his money and position. If I had been cursed with a few hundreds a year more than he has, you would not have forsaken me. You never loved me; but for a whole year you have succeeded in deceiving me — in making me believe that you did. This is the thing I find unpardonable. Men have killed women for such treachery as yours. Were I to kill you, it would save poor Mynors a good many years of misery. But the code of civilised morals forbids so satisfactory a solution. You must live, and destroy his illusions one by one. I ought to thank you for my freedom, but that I cannot do, being human. As a man in worse plight than mine once said: "My love hath wrought into my life so far that my doom is, I love thee still." There lies the humiliation and the sting.

The woman's lips curved into a smile of foreseen triumph. The insult of the first part of the letter was nothing to her. There was his written confession. In spite of her betrayal, he loved her still.

After the lapse of all these years the lava-torrent of his boyish fury had no doubt cooled. The love might well remain.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD LOVE

"Now hate rules a heart which in love's easy chains
Once passion's tumultuous blandishments knew;
Despair now inflames the dark tide of his veins,
He ponders in frenzy o'er love's last adieu."—BYRON.

A WEEK later Mrs. Mynors stood before her mirror at a much earlier hour than was her wont. She was arranging her veil with a hand that shook, and eyes full of a curious mixture of anxiety and triumph. The anxiety was because she was bound upon an errand of enormous strategic importance; the triumph because her imagination ran on ahead and pictured things that she would have blushed to own.

Her old lover had assented to her proposal for a meeting. He was to be this morning at twelve o'clock at the Sportswoman — that smartest and most go-ahead of county ladies' clubs in London.

Virginia stood near. She held in her hand a dainty handbag, embroidered in steel beads and lined with pale violet. Into this she was putting a purse, a powder-puff, a wisp of old lace that was supposed to be a handkerchief, and so on. The aroma of the expensive perfume was over everything.

Mrs. Mynors' costume was a subtle scheme of faint half-mourning. It was most becoming.

"What time do you think you shall be back?" asked Virginia.

"My child, how can I say? You must expect me when

you see me. It depends so much upon what I accomplish. If Osbert Gaunt proves disagreeable, I must just get a bit of lunch at the club and come straight home. If he is hospitably inclined, why, you see, it might be later."

"I only wanted to know how much money you are likely to spend."

"Don't trouble about that, dear one. I have plenty of money for my modest needs."

She stepped back, surveyed the general effect of her appearance, and sighed a little. Then, opening one of the small jewel drawers in her toilet table, she took out a ring-case, extracted the ring it contained, and slipped it upon her finger. It was a large tourmalin, set in small brilliants — a lovely blue, like the eyes of its wearer.

"What a pretty ring! I never saw it before," said Virginia, with interest. She loved pretty things. That trait she had inherited from her mother.

"His engagement ring," said the widow pensively. "He would not take it back. He said it would bring a curse upon any woman who wore it. He shall see that I have kept it."

Virginia's heart surged up within her until she almost broke into weeping. Her own mother, the widow of Bernard Mynors, the widow of the most-beloved, the dearest, the best, the handsomest — she was setting out gaily to fascinate an old lover, wearing on her finger the ring he had bestowed in the days when she had never seen her husband.

"How she can!" thought Virgie to herself. Her mother was a continual puzzle to her. In her intense simplicity the girl took her usually at her own value. She believed devoutly that it was at great personal cost that Mrs. Mynors was going to town that day. She judged her feelings by her own. And yet, and yet ——

The sound of wheels on the road outside caused her to

look from the window. "Why, here is an empty fly stopping at the door," said she in a tone of surprise.

"I ordered it, Virgie," replied her mother, a little embarrassed. "I have so little strength, especially of a morning, I felt that, on an errand like this, I should want all my force, all my coolness. This heat is so unnerving."

She smiled deprecatingly. "My poor little fly is the sprat to catch a whale," she laughed. Then impetuously she flung her arms about her daughter's neck. "Wish me luck! Oh, wish me luck!" she cried.

Virginia's warm heart leapt at the cry. She embraced her mother with all the fervour she dare employ without crushing the delicate toilette. They went downstairs together, the lady stepped into the shabby fly with a look of disdainful fortitude, her sunshade was given her, and with a wave of the hand to the girl at the gate she started off upon her great mission. Virgie went slowly into the kitchen, sat down wearily, and poured out her tepid tea. After eating and drinking a few mouthfuls listlessly, she roused herself to prepare fresh tea for Pansy and to carry her breakfast upstairs.

"Good morning, precious! How have you slept?" she cried cheerily, as she set down the tray, drew up the blind, and came to the bedside. Pansy lay there smiling, perfectly flat on her back, with Ermyntrude, the new doll, at her side.

"Slept booful. Not one pain all night. But I'm fearfully hungry, Virgie!"

"I don't wonder; I am dreadfully late! I had to get mother off, you see. She has just started," replied Virginia, trying to keep the sorrow out of her trembling voice. She stooped, touched a handle below the bed, and with incredible care and delicacy wound the little cripple up into a posture just enough tilted to enable her to feed herself.

"Gone to see a gentleman she used to know before she knew dad," remarked Pansy, pondering. "He'll think she's every bit as pretty as she was then. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I am sure he must think so."

"Oh, Virgie!"— after a long pause —"suppose he was to ask her again?"

Her sister winced as this dark idea was thus frankly expressed in words. She had, however, been more or less prepared for it.

"I don't think it very likely, Pansy," she replied slowly, "but if he did, and if mother thought it was her duty to say 'Yes,' we must not make it hard for her."

"How could it be her duty to say 'Yes'?" demanded Pansy argumentatively. "She loved dad, and it would be beastly to have a step-father."

"It would be beastlier still not have enough to eat," was the thought in Virgie's heart. She did not express it, however. The child knew nothing of the terrible state of things, and must not know unless it was inevitable. "We'll hope for the best, darling. He may not ask her," she softly told the child. "And now eat your breakfast, while I go and clear away downstairs."

. . . . . .

From Euston one must positively take a taxi in order to arrive at Dover Street. Mrs. Mynors instructed the driver to throw back the hood; and reclined, her sunshade between her delicate face and the June sun, enjoying a few minutes of the kind of pleasure in which she revelled.

Ah! the joy of it. The gay streets, the well-dressed crowds, the enticing shops, the loaded flower-baskets, at the street corners, the window-boxes in the tall houses, the flashing cars, the bustle and movement of London in the season. Here, she felt, was her native element. To this she belonged — she whom a cruel fate had treated so

ill as to cause the whole structure of her pleasure to crumble to nothing at the very time of life when a woman begins to feel that she needs comforts and luxury.

For forty years she had enjoyed that empire which any beautiful woman may enjoy if she chooses. Her beauty had prevented every one who came near her from realising the truth about her. Had you told her that she was a monster of selfishness, that she had never loved anybody but herself, that she had jilted a poor man to marry a rich one, and that she had loved neither the one nor the other, she would simply have wondered how your mind could have become so warped as to cause you to utter such slanders.

Now that she had the twofold weapons of beauty and misfortune, surely none could resist.

Not for long years had her heart so throbbed, her blood run so swiftly, as this morning, as the taxi turned out of Bond Street, slid along Grafton Street into Dover Street, and stopped at the doors of the club.

Since her husband's death she had never entered it. Now she wondered how she had kept away so long, and admired with fervour her own Spartan heroism. How meekly she had bowed under undeserved adversity!

She strolled into the dressing-room, put down her sunshade, and contemplated herself in a mirror. The things she had seen in the shops that morning, and the costumes in the streets, had put her somewhat out of conceit of her own appearance. The mirror, however, restored all her self-confidence. She was looking lovely, with a bloom in her cheeks that the fagged-looking London women could not hope to emulate.

She used her powder with judgment and restraint, adjusted her veil, and went out into the hall.

"I am going into the chintz parlour," said she to the

page-boy, "and I am expecting a gentleman by appointment. Bring him to me there — Mrs. Mynors."

She went upstairs, outwardly quite tranquil, though inwardly she was shaken with a storm of excitement which she could not wholly understand. In old days she had feared Osbert Gaunt. She remembered that, though she did not own it to herself. Devoted slave as he had been, she had had perhaps some faint instinctive premonition that he was in reality her master. He had been subject to bursts of passion, to fits of sullen rage. It had been exciting, but exhausting, to be loved by him.

All that was twenty years ago. What was he now?

She surveyed the pretty little parlour, furnished in a clever imitation of the Georgian era. From among the chairs she selected two. Then, changing her mind, she chose a small couch, with room for two to sit upon it. She brought forward a little table, put some magazines upon it, opened one and became so absorbed in the sketch of a Paris gown which it contained that she started annoyingly at the voice of the page-boy announcing her visitor.

Osbert Gaunt walked in. Her first thought was that, changed though he was, she should have known him anywhere. Certainly his was a personality not easy to forget. He was dark complexioned by nature, and, as he lived in the open air, he was also much tanned. His coal-black hair was slightly softened with grey at the temples, but his moustache was raven black, and it altered his appearance to something curiously unlike her memory of the keen young boyish face. He walked with the limp which she remembered well, and as they shook hands his glance swept over her from head to foot, appraising and, as it seemed, condemning, for his lip curled into a sneer.

He was perfectly self-possessed. The lady was genuinely agitated.

"I trust that I am punctual to your appointment, madam," he said drily.

They were alone in the room. She noticed that with thankfulness, even while she realised how entirely the man had the advantage over her. To her, this interview meant everything. To him, apparently, very little. She was so much affected that she sat down at once, making a little appealing movement with her hand that he should sit beside her, as she murmured: "Oh, Osbert, you are good to come . . . and you are so little changed."

He replied, with indifference that amounted to discourtesy: "I came to suit my own convenience; and I have changed completely."

With this preliminary amenity he looked around, chose a chair, brought it forward, and sat down facing her. His rudeness was so disconcerting that she forgot her part, and spoke confusedly:

"Oh no, indeed, you have not changed; you always used to contradict. That was part of your temperament."

"Pardon me, I am not here to discuss my temperament. I have come on business."

She made a little deprecating sound, as though he had hurt her. "Oh, Osbert, this is dreadful! Dreadful! If I had expected this, I would not have appealed to you. How could I dream that you would have remained unforgiving all these years?"

She drew out the tiny handkerchief, redolent of lily of the valley. In old days a tear from her had driven him mad.

"You surprise me," was his answer. "I understood that you desired to discuss a mortgage. If you will allow me to say so, I must confess that any allusion from you to our past relations seems to me to be in the worst of taste."

"Osbert! Oh, Osbert! That you can speak so to me!

It is useless — quite useless to go farther. Had I been rich and prosperous, I could understand your desire to taunt me. . . . I never could have believed that you would stoop to it when you know quite well the straits to which we are reduced — that I and mine are starving!"

Again his look swept over her, as if mocking at her general aspect of subdued luxury.

"Madam, it seems to me that the unfortunate tradesmen whom you employ are more likely to starve than you are," he said emphatically. "But, as regards your financial position, that is, I suppose, part of the subject which we are here to discuss. I gather that my foreclosing of this mortgage embarrasses you seriously?"

She kept her face turned from him, allowing one crystal tear to lie undried upon her soft cheek, as she answered in low, grief-broken tones:

"We were almost beggars before. This is the final straw."

He took the chance she gave him to look full at her. Her aspect of humiliation and discouragement seemed to please him.

"Good!" said he. "Then we come to something definite. What do you suggest that I should do in this matter? I am a little puzzled, because you cannot, I think, have supposed that I should be likely to strain any point in your favour — rather perhaps the reverse. Eh?"

She paused, as it were for breath. What could she do? She had thought of him in many ways, but had foreseen nothing like this. Even her impervious vanity was forced to the conclusion that the sight of her in her scarcely impaired beauty moved him no more than if she had been a hairdresser's block. Not even the ashes of passion remained. He was pleased that she should be humiliated. He liked to have her at his feet. Oh, why had she not guessed that a nature like his — warped, distorted, embit-

tered — would rejoice at seeing the woman who had injured him brought low? His foot was on her neck! She felt inclined to spring up and rush from the room — or to snatch his hands and make some wild appeal! Why, this was the man who had trembled at her touch — who had thrashed the son of a peer for saying that she was a flirt! This was the man who had been made happy with a smile, desperate with a frown. Yet now. . . .

In fierce longing to bring him once more into subjection, she stifled down her resentment, resisted her impulse to give way. As his insulting words stung her, she winced, like one enduring an unworthy blow.

"I made a mistake," said she in low tones. "I must own it. I actually did, as you suggest, hope that you would strain a point in my favour. All that I remember of you is noble. I fancied that the fact — which I admit — that I once injured you, so far from being against me, would constrain you the more to serve me, if you could."

"Indeed! So that was what you thought! It was rather clever of you, but not quite clever enough. I have to own that I don't at all consider that your having successfully hoodwinked me twenty years ago gives you a right to do it again. But let that pass. It is the mortgage which we must keep in mind. I think it not impossible that we may come to terms, that I may be able to afford you some relief — on conditions"— he held up his hand hastily as she turned impulsively on her seat —"on conditions, I say — you had better wait to hear me."

For the first time she let her eyes meet his. The cruelty, the ironic sense of mastery conveyed to her from beneath those half-shut lids, made her shudder involuntarily. So might an Inquisitor survey the victim brought bound into his presence. Still she kept up the pose — the only one that occurred to her scared wits — the pose of relying upon his nobility.

"I knew — I knew you could not mean to be merciless," she faltered.

"Don't go too fast," he replied coldly. "There is much to consider before thanks can appropriately be offered. In the first place, a few questions are necessary. To begin. Have you a daughter bearing a remarkable resemblance to yourself? And was she in London a week or two ago with some friends who have a motor-car — a young man and a young woman?"

Mrs. Mynors sat a moment speechless, considering this new turn of the incredible conversation. "Yes," she faltered at last, "that is quite true. Virginia was in town with our friends, the Rosenbergs."

His lip curled. "*Virginia!* You named her after yourself!"

"It was my husband's wish," she stammered. "She is the dearest, the best girl in the world!"

"Madam"— with mock reverence —"that is an unnecessary statement; she is your daughter — and she is, I feel sure, in all respects worthy of you. I saw her in a picture-gallery not long ago. Interested by the astonishing likeness, I took pains to overhear some of her conversation. The second Virginia is a replica of the first — which is saying a great deal. You are attached to her, madam."

"Attached to her? Attached to my darling daughter? Are you mad, Osbert?"

"I don't think so. I am still a bachelor, you know, and the proposal which I put before you is this: If your daughter will undertake the position which her mother declined, we will cry quits, you and I."

She had almost screamed in the extremity of her surprise and mortification. Had he struck her with a horsewhip she could not have felt more outraged. Fury, resentment, a wild, combative resistance which she could

not recognise as jealousy, deprived her for a while of speech. She was choking, inarticulate with the force of blind feeling which shook her as a tempest shakes a tree.

"You are atrocious!" she ejaculated at last. "Simply atrocious! What can you mean? Virgie won't have you."

"In that case there will be no need of further discussion," was his answer. "In your place, I think I should at least place the offer before her. Should she accept it, I will make you an allowance of three hundred pounds a year for life, besides undertaking the cost of your son's education. Are there other children?"

She was staring at him as one may gaze, fascinated, upon a cobra about to strike. "One other," she hurriedly replied. "A little girl — *she is lame.*"

"Ha!" A dull flush rose to his face. "Cripples seem to haunt your footsteps. Well — in the event of the acceptance of my offer, it shall be my care to see that she has the proper treatment and the best advice."

"Good gracious me!" slowly said the bewildered woman. "Am I dreaming? Osbert, you *must* be mad!"

"Madam, I think you will find that I am considered remarkably sane by most people. Anyway, you have my offer — make what you can of it. I will put it in writing, if you like. Your daughter won't find many husbands who would be willing to marry and provide for the entire family. Yet, you see, such is my devotion, that I am ready to do even this for her charming sake."

"Devotion? You have no devotion!" she cried wildly. "You are taking advantage of my helplessness to torture me! You would torture Virgie! How can you feel any devotion for a girl you have only set eyes upon once?"

"Well, we will say it is not devotion that inspires me, but a desire to get a bit of my own back," said he, with a most unpleasant smile. "She will be the Andromeda,

sacrificed for the rest of you — offered to the Beast — myself. You flinched from such a fate. If she now undertakes to brave it, will not that be poetic justice?"

Mrs. Mynors swallowed once or twice, blinked, tried to visualise the impression this speech gave. Since his entrance, nothing that Gaunt said had sounded real. There had been a sarcasm, a jeering cadence; he had been playing with her all the time. But these words had a different ring. He was in earnest. It seemed as if the last sentence revealed to her something of his inner state of mind. It was like coming, in the dusk, upon the sudden mouth of a black pit. She had said, "You would torture Virginia!" and something in his reply suggested that her random words were true.

She sat staring, confronting the set mask of his face. The old fear of him came back, after twenty years, racing up across the vistas of memory as the Brittany tide races over the St. Malo sands. In this man there was something perverted, something evil, something with which she must hold no traffic, make no bargain. She knew that she ought to end this preposterous interview; to speak a few dignified reproachful words and leave the tempter and his monstrous proposal.

"Virginia," she managed at last to say, "shall never even know of your horrible suggestion."

He took his watch from his pocket, glanced at it, replaced it, and spoke.

"Then you reject this offer unconditionally?"

"As you foresaw that I should!" she cried, with a burst of tears hastily choked back.

"Oh, pardon me, I foresaw nothing of the kind. You forget that in old times I knew you rather well; and I never thought you a fool."

"But you are impossible — outrageous!" she expostulated. "Why should you want to marry Virginia?"

"I am old enough to know my own mind, I suppose. My reasons — pardon me — are not your concern. My terms are before you, and I am somewhat pressed for time. If you refuse *tout court,* there is nothing further to be said. I will take my leave. But it seems to me that you might submit the case to the judgment of Miss Mynors. Tell her that I have an estate in Derbyshire, and can settle five thousand pounds upon her, in addition to what I propose doing for her family. If she has anything like her mother's eye to the main chance, she will think twice before turning me down."

Part of the rage which surged in the woman's heart as she glared at him was sheer jealousy — jealousy of her young, fresh daughter. They had met, those two. He had seen Virginia in a picture-gallery. He, a man of past forty, wanted to marry this girl of twenty! Oh, what a fool! What a fool! When she, the suitable age, the suitable partner, the old, lost love in almost all her old charm, sat there before him!

"Osbert," she murmured faintly, "don't jeer at me! For pity's sake be yourself, your old self, for five minutes! Tell me the meaning of this unkind jest."

"Once more, madam, let me assure you that I am in earnest. I mean what I say. I am aware that my proposal does sound quixotic; but I will have it all legally embodied and made certain. If Miss Mynors will marry me, I will do for you what I have said. If she will not, then I regret to be unable to offer you *any* assistance."

He took up his hat and rose. "May I know whether you will undertake to convey my offer to your daughter?" he asked. "If you decline, I leave London to-day. I farm my own land, and we are busy at Omberleigh just now. If you decide to tell her, I will await the first post here in London the day after to-morrow; and, in the event

of her being favourably inclined, I shall come down to Wayhurst that afternoon."

Mrs. Mynors clenched her small, ineffectual fists. There he stood, pitiless. Her presence meant nothing to him. It left him utterly unmoved. How he had changed from the days of his emotional youth!

He was master of the situation. If she arose in her offended majesty, marched off and left him — to what must she return? To absolute pauperism. She had no relatives of her own, and her husband's few distant cousins had been far more frequently appealed to than her daughter knew, and were tired of helping. By promising to let Virginia know his terms, she committed herself to nothing. If there had been an alternative. . . . But there really was not!

She, too, rose. "I — I suppose I must tell Virginia," she said sullenly; "but I shall forbid her to accept your preposterous suggestion."

"Oh, no, you won't," he replied, again with that odious smile. "Too much hangs upon it for you. We part, then, with at least a sporting chance of meeting again. I hope I shall prove a dutiful son-in-law. Good morning."

He bowed, seeming not to notice her appealing hands, outstretched in one last attempt to pierce his armour.

He was gone. Thus ended her mission — the last throw of the dice, upon which she had staked so much!

Nothing now between her and beggary but the remains of the cheque for twenty pounds, sent to her by Mr. Resenberg.

CHAPTER VI

GAUNT'S TERMS

"Her hand was close to her daughter's heart
And it felt the life-blood's sudden start;
A quick deep breath did the damsel draw
Like the struck fawn in the oakenshaw."—ROSSETTI.

VIRGINIA, lily-pale in the heat, sat at the window of the tiny parlour dignified by the name of dining-room, adding up accounts. She had given Pansy her lunch, eaten some bread and cheese herself, and left the child to her daily afternoon rest while she applied herself to the discussion of ways and means.

It was Tony's half-holiday, and he would be home, he promised, at five o'clock, to help her carry down the little invalid into the garden to have tea. He was renouncing an hour of his precious cricket to do this. What a darling he was! Virginia's eyes grew misty as she thought of him — how pluckily he went without things that "other chaps" had! How loyally he refrained from piercing her heart with the thought of her own helplessness to supply him with what he wanted!

Now, for the first time, she was alone with the problem created by her mother's improvidence. In all its bare hideousness, the thing confronted her. The rent was due. They had always waited to pay it until the cheque for the quarter's rent at Lissendean came in. Now there was no cheque to be expected. If her mother's errand to-day had failed, she must give notice to quit that very afternoon.

Even so, where was this quarter's rent to come from? The balance at the bank was seven pounds six and twopence.

The furniture must be sold. This, with her mother's pretty things, would pay the landlord. Afterwards — what?

The sweet eyes grew dim with a secret, bewildered kind of pain. Why had Gerald Rosenberg gone away without a word? . . . Yet, when she asked herself why not, she had no intelligible answer to give. Nothing had passed between himself and her, in words. Only she had been conscious of his unceasing, absorbed attention, given to herself, whenever they had been in company. There had been a tiny secret thread of mutual understanding — or so Virginia had thought. It now appeared that she was mistaken. There had been nothing between them. It was like brushing gossamer from before one's eyes. It had been there, but it was nothing. The first strong light of reason dispersed it. Something that had been very sweet, very poignant, had come to an end. While telling herself that it had all been her own fancy, inwardly she knew it was not so. There had been something. But it was only gossamer — just midsummer madness.

Now that the doom had fallen, she would never see the Rosenbergs again. She would have to be a governess, if such a post could be obtained.

Keenly she wondered what was passing between Mrs. Mynors and her old lover. Though her nature revolted from the idea, she yet caught herself hoping that a marriage between the two might come about. If this Mr. Gaunt — what an uncomfortable name! — was ready to take his former sweetheart to his home, he surely would offer asylum to her children, or if not, arrange that they could be together elsewhere.

Ah! That would be the thing! She lost herself in

visions of this little home with herself, Pansy and Tony in it — no mother to wait upon; for dearly as she loved the privilege of waiting upon her mother, Virginia had to own that it was mamma who made things difficult.

She shut her neatly kept books with a sigh, and as she did so, glancing up, she saw to her surprise, that her mother was opening the garden gate.

She must have caught a very early train home!

Swiftly Virginia sprang up, hurried to the door, and admitted the returned traveller. One glance at the pretty, sulky face, the lids slightly puffed as with recent tears, told Virginia that the news was not good; and her heart sank to a degree so unexpectedly low that she girded at herself for a coward and a despicable person.

"Oh, my dear, you have walked all this way alone in the heat! How tired you must be. We are going to have tea in the garden later on — come to your sitting-room; let me put you on the sofa and take off your shoes. You will soon feel better," she crooned over her mother, as she led her to the couch, tended her gently and lovingly, and — oh, crowning boon — asked no questions.

The care was accepted, but with a reservation which the sensitive girl was quick to feel. Gazing on the averted face and pouting lips, she could almost have thought that mamma was vexed with her, had that not been improbable under the circumstances. What was it? Did mamma think she ought to have met the train? Or did she want special tea made for her alone, immediately? Well, that was easily done. "Lie and rest, dear one," she said sympathetically, "and I will just make you a cup of tea; the kettle won't take five minutes to boil."

When she returned, with the dainty tray, and the wafer bread and butter, her mother was sitting up, her feet on the ground, her elbows on a small table, crying silently into her ridiculous pocket-handkerchief. This could, of

course, only mean complete disaster. With a dreadful sinking of the heart Virginia murmured:

"You will tell me all about it when you feel able?"

Uncovering her eyes, Mrs. Mynors fixed them reproachfully upon her daughter; and the girl, conscious of some unspoken reproach, felt guilty, though no misdeeds came to her mind.

"Virgie," said a hollow voice, as at last the silence was broken, "did Miriam Rosenberg, when you were in town, take you to any picture galleries?"

Virgie stood, the picture of astonishment.

"Why, yes, we went to the Academy," said she, wonderingly, "and — oh, yes — we went to Hertford House as well."

As she spoke the words, the memory of that day, that last day with Gerald, caused the rosy tint to steal up on her pale cheeks. The lynx eyes fixed upon her saw and misinterpreted.

"Did you meet a gentleman there?"

Still more mystified, Virginia shook her head.

"Virginia, think! A dark man, who walked lame."

The girl started — yes, her mother was not mistaken, she started quite visibly. "The lame man," she said. "Yes, of course, I remember."

Something like fury gleamed in the elder woman's blue eyes as she stood up, confronting her taller daughter. "He was Mr. Gaunt!" she flashed.

"What! *That* was Mr. Gaunt? Was it indeed? Oh, then, perhaps that accounts for it!"

"Accounts for what?"

"That he looked as if he expected me to bow to him or speak to him — that he looked as if he thought he knew me! I am very like you, mamma, am I not? Everybody says so."

"He saw the likeness, and remembers the meeting,"

muttered Mrs. Mynors, crumpling up her handkerchief into a tight ball with vindictive fingers. "I suppose you thought he admired you very much?"

"Not at all," returned the girl at once. "I thought he looked angry or offended. He — he followed us about rather persistently, until Mims and I felt uncomfortable. We went and sat outside, at the top of the stairs, to get out of his way."

"Humph! He did admire you, though, for all that! At least, he wants to marry you!"

"Wha-a-t!" Virginia was guilty of vulgarity in her amused amaze. "Oh, mummie, don't be silly! He meant you. You have made a mistake."

Her mother gave a short, bitter laugh. "I am *passée,*" she said through her teeth. "I ought to have known better. I ought to have sent you as my ambassador! You might have been able to come to terms. Tell me," she cried sharply, grasping her daughter's wrist, "tell me what you thought of him? Sombre, interesting — eh? The strong silent man — that kind of thing? You must have used your eyes in a way that I am sure I never taught you."

Virginia stood transfixed. She felt as if she were talking to a stranger. This was a mother she had never seen. "Oh, mother, dear, what can you mean?" she remonstrated, in low, hurt tones.

With another mirthless laugh, Mrs. Mynors flung back upon her sofa pillows. She began to pour tea into a cup, and her hand shook.

"How little girls understand," said she with sarcasm. "Tell me now, honestly, what *did* you think of him?"

Virginia remained a moment, searching her memory. Every minute of that afternoon was etched clearly in her mind's eye. "Mims did not like him at all," said she.

"She thought he meant to be rude. But I thought that he looked — very unhappy."

"A case of mutual love at first sight, evidently," was the scornful comment. "Well, shall you have him, Virgie? I am to make you the formal offer of his hand."

"Mother, I think — I think I had better leave you to drink some tea and rest," said the meek Virginia. "I really can't understand what you mean, you are talking wildly, and I am afraid the long, hot journey has unnerved you."

"Stop, Virgie, don't go out. I forbid it. You must stay and listen to what I have to say. Before saying it, I wanted to find out just how much had passed between you, and I understand things a little better after what you tell me. Well! In short, I have what Mr. Gaunt calls a business offer to put before you, and you have until to-morrow afternoon's post in which to make up your mind."

Virginia obediently seated herself upon a chair opposite her mother, who, between sips of tea, told her of the offer made by Gaunt.

The elder woman's mind was in a strange tumult — she hardly knew which was the keener feeling in her — her furious jealousy or her devouring desire that her daughter should accept the offer which would lift them out of poverty. On her journey down in the train, she had been growing used to the idea. The sense of outrage, which had stung her so smartly at first, subsided a little, in the light of other considerations. What chances of matrimony had Virginia? Since she had let young Rosenberg slip through her fingers, her mother was beginning to see that she was not the kind of girl to seize chances, even should they present themselves. If Gaunt were serious in

his wild plan, if it could be shown that he was financially solvent and able to do as he promised, then she had better swallow her feelings and take what she could get.

She told herself that it was one of those cases of sudden electric sympathy — of love at first sight. Yet she knew that she said this only to salve her conscience. She was, as her old lover had told her, no fool. She saw his conduct, all of a piece. Why had he taken up the mortgage on Lissendean? To have her in his power. Why did he wish to become her son-in-law? For the same reason. Try to deceive herself as she might, she knew that love had no place in the man's thoughts. When he had spoken of "getting a bit of his own back," he had spoken with a certain momentary glimpse of self revelation. He had uncovered a corner of a mind perverted, a mind which had brooded long upon a solitary idea of grievance until obsessed by it.

Mrs. Mynors, in her sub-conscious self, knew all this. Had she told her daughter, the girl must have recoiled shuddering from the prospect of such an alliance. As her old lover had foreseen, she was very careful *not* to tell her daughter anything of the kind. Her better nature had at first fought within her a little. She resolved that she would describe Gaunt's malevolence, his cold-blooded assurance. Then she would come forward, offer to share a part of Virginia's burden, decide that they must stand together and face what her own selfish, mean folly had brought upon them all. But, as she strove to envisage some of what such a step must cost her, she had cowered away from the picture.

She *could not* face beggary.

She began to temporise. How did she know the exact position of affairs? It was possible that, strive though he might to conceal it from her, the man was in love. She determined upon her course of action. She would

tell Virginia how Gaunt had watched her in the Gallery. The girl's own demeanour should give her the cue as to whether or no she should proceed to unfold his proposal. If the sudden fancy had been mutual . . . after all, it *might* have been mutual. . . .

She returned home. She spoke. Virginia betrayed consciousness. Before the mention of the lame man — at the very memory of Hertford House — she had blushed, she had been embarrassed. Further questioning had elicited her clear memory of Gaunt's attention and pursuit. She had owned, with a distinct hesitation, that she thought he looked unhappy. That decided Mrs. Mynors. With a new hard-heartedness, born of her new, tormenting jealousy of Virgie's youth and sweetness, she stamped down the deep-lying scruples. She made the best of Gaunt's case, and said that he wished to come down to Wayhurst to plead his suit himself.

It took some time to convince Virgie that the man was in earnest. Yet, recalling his appearance and manner, as she held them in her memory, the girl owned to herself that this was a man who might make an eccentric, even a quixotic, offer.

The interview was broken off short by the entrance of Tony, who flung open the front door, loudly whistling, and could be heard throwing down his books, and shouting for Virgie. He knew better than to enter the little boudoir, his mother's sanctum. Very, very rarely was he permitted to set foot within its charmed area.

"I have until to-morrow's post," said Virgie gravely, as she lifted the tray with the tea-things, and carried it away.

The whole affair must be pushed into the background for the time being. Pansy was to be fetched downstairs, the tea-table spread in the garden, more tea prepared. Tony was a willing, if somewhat boisterous, helper. He

and his sister between them soon arranged things, and the too brilliant eyes of the little cripple glistened with pleasure as she was laid beside the wire arch smothered in Hiawatha, to enjoy the air of the exquisite summer evening.

Virgie sat, the socks she endlessly knitted for Tony in her never idle fingers, watching the clear-cut profile, which, as she could not conceal from herself, grew ever more ethereal. Pansy did not seem definitely worse, and had less pain than formerly. But she was wasting, and her sister knew it.

The Wayhurst doctor was very anxious that a new treatment, in which he had great faith, should be tried. He thought it the only chance; but as it was protracted, and involved a long course of skilled nursing, with daily medical supervision, it would be extremely costly. It was, therefore, out of the question.

Yet, if Virginia married Mr. Gaunt, it would become easy. He had actually volunteered that Pansy should have all the help obtainable. She glanced from Pansy to Tony, and at the darns on his threadbare trouser-knees. She heard his jolly laugh, and also his quickly smothered sigh, as he remarked that he was the only chap in his form who did not belong to the school O.T.C. He knew that the uniform and camp expenses were beyond his sister's resources.

This, too, would be rectified, if she did as suggested. It was a bribe of whose strength Gaunt himself could form no idea.

Later, when Tony had scampered away to bowl at the nets, and she was alone in the kitchen washing up tea-things, she bent her mind upon the extraordinary turn of affairs. The heat had made her so languid that she was obliged to sit down while the kettle boiled upon her tiny oil-stove. Her visit to London had done her spirits good,

but London air is not the best for recuperative purposes. Moreover, she had been up late most nights during her stay in town, and the thought of Gerald had at times disturbed her rest. Since her return — and more especially since hearing about the mortgage trouble — her strength seemed to grow less and less. The knowledge that she was almost at the end of her means, and saw no chance of replenishing the empty exchequer, had acted upon a body weakened by a long course of underfeeding. In her heart she knew that she could not go on much longer acting as general servant, and starving herself that the others might have enough. If she broke down — if her health proved to be so undermined that she could not take a situation — what was to become of these helpless ones?

The idea that her mother could help in any way never occurred to her. The three were bracketed together in her mind, as those for whom she had promised her dying father to care.

Now came a way out — not an inviting one, but one that had to be faced nevertheless. If she married Mr. Gaunt, he undertook to lift her burdens from her shoulders. Moreover, he lived in the country — the real country. Omberleigh Grange was in Derbyshire, and it must have a garden — a real garden, such as she had been born to, such as she loved. A garden in which to rest and grow strong again, a garden in which Pansy might be wheeled along smooth walks, and lie under the spreading shade of big trees. These things could be hers, at a price. What did the price involve?

Mr. Gaunt had loved her mother. He knew, of course, that her mother had preferred another man; but she, Virginia, bore a wonderful resemblance to the woman lost, and the lonely man wanted to satisfy his empty heart by cherishing her. In return, he would do for mother, for Pansy, for Tony, all the things that she, poor Virgie, in

her helplessness, could not do, with all her love. The sacrifice demanded was just the sacrifice of herself. Well — what did that matter? Why should she not be sacrificed, for the good and happiness of those she loved so ardently? It really was very simple, after all.

Perhaps a few weeks earlier she might not have felt quite so indifferent. There had been shining gates — the gates of a young girl's fancy — and shyly they had begun to open, and to show a tiny glimpse of rosy mysteries within.

That was over now. It had been but gossamer and illusion. This was a real, definite, tangible plan — a rope held out to save her perishing family, drifting on a bit of wreckage. In the seizing of the rope, she herself, incidentally, would be sacrificed. That was all. Why not?

By the time that the scanty crockery was arranged in spotless order on the shelves, and the kitchen as tidy as a new pin, the girl had practically come to a decision. She said nothing, however, that night. Pansy was a little over-tired after her garden excursion, and could not get to sleep, so, instead of sitting with her mother downstairs, Virginia remained at the little invalid's bedside and read aloud. When at last the child slept, she was too tired to do anything but go to bed herself. Nevertheless, her preoccupations awoke her in the early summer dawn.

In her utter simplicity she slipped from bed and knelt down in her white garment. She asked for guidance, and it seemed to her childlike faith that it was granted. Like her namesake in far-off old Rome, she must be sacrificed. She remembered the words of the ballad she had learned as a child, the words spoken by the frantic father of the Roman Virginia: "And now, my own dear little girl, there is no way but this!"

It was as though her own father's voice spoke to her from the grave, urging her to courage and a stout heart.

The man was a stranger, the man was formidable; but she would be so good to him that they must grow to understand each other.

It was the only way, and she resolved to take it.

CHAPTER VII

VIRGINIA DECIDES

"Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning
Neat as bee, as sweet and busy,
Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
Aired and set to rights the house, . . .
Fed the poultry, sat and sewed;
Talked as modest maidens should."

— CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

WHEN Virginia went into her mother's room after breakfast that morning, she told her quietly that she had made her decision.

Mrs. Mynors gave a half-stifled, excited exclamation. For the life of her she could not have told what she hoped or desired. She stared at her composed daughter with eyes half of entreaty, half of fear.

"I shall write and tell Mr. Gaunt to come to-morrow," said Virginia with calm.

"Oh, for pity's sake, child, are you not mad?" cried the wretched woman in the bed.

"I have considered it," was the steady answer. "He is unhappy, and I am pretty sure that I could be a comfort to him. His way of doing things seems odd; but he is lonely, and I daresay he has been soured. I will do all I can to make him happy, if he on his side will perform his promises to you and the children."

"Virgie, don't!" The voice was so altered, so strange, that the girl paused, wondering.

"Don't? Why do you say so?"

"Because I——" Mrs. Mynors came to a stop. What could she say? "Because I have a lurking idea that he will not be kind to you." How ridiculous that sounded! And upon what was it based? Only upon the man's manner — his insolence, his evident desire to wound and insult her. Somehow she could not tell Virgie how his open contempt had stung.

"Because you — you don't know him — you can't love him," she stammered.

"But *you* knew him and loved him well enough to promise to marry him," countered Virgie instantly. "Of course, that has great weight with me. If he were a complete stranger, it would be different." She stood beside the bed, playing with one of its brass corner-knobs. "You know, mamma, I am rather an odd girl," said she with a swift blush. "I think I am attracted to what I pity. It would be waste to marry me to an adoring husband, who would give me everything I desired. I would rather give than have things given to me."

Mrs. Mynors lay back, watching her through narrowed eyes. "You are — yes, you certainly are odd," she muttered. "I own that I don't understand you in the least."

Virgie smiled. None knew better than she herself the truth of this statement.

"Of course," said she, "I am not accepting his offer definitely. I am simply saying that he may come here and see me to-morrow. I could not clinch the matter until we have some hold over him."

"What?" cried her mother sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," replied her young daughter simply, "Mr. Gaunt has made some big promises. How do we know that he means to keep them? You say he is eccentric. He may not be trustworthy. In any case, I shall not

agree to do as he asks without being certain that he will do as he offers. We must go to Mr. Askew and ask him to come and meet him, so that a proper settlement may be prepared."

"Well, upon my word! Virgie, you cold-blooded little horror!" began Mrs. Mynors, almost in a scream. She broke off abruptly and rolled over, hiding her face in the pillows.

"But, mother," said Virgie wonderingly, "you don't reflect. I am promising to give all that I have or am. Suppose I did that, and found myself cheated of the price? You must know that I should not think of marrying a man I have hardly seen and do not love, except for you and the children. Do you call me cold-blooded because I am careful to assure myself that I shan't be sacrificed in vain?"

Her mother wrung her hands. "Virgie, you know that I do not demand such an unnatural bargain?"

"Of course I know that you don't demand it," was the quiet answer. "It is my own decision. I promise you one thing: if, when Mr. Gaunt comes, I feel that he is a person I never could care for, if he repels me utterly, I will draw back. But you know, mother, you have told me one or two things about him, as he was in the old days when you loved him — and they were rather fine."

"Oh, but he is so altered," sobbed Mrs. Mynors from the pillow. "You would never know him for the same man. He used to be so tender, so chivalrous, so impulsive. Now he seems so hard, so ——"

She broke off. What was she doing? The affair that was to bring her comparative ease, to keep her from starvation, was well in train. Should she herself stop it? She reflected that Virginia was not accepting definitely — only promising to consider the matter. Let things take their course. She believed the girl had some sentimental school-

girl fancy about Osbert! Yes, she had thought that from the first. She was wasting her compassion, her delicate feeling.

After all, considering Virgie's beauty, was it likely that Gaunt would be cruel to her? With a feeling almost like hatred she studied the pure outline of the profile, the effect of the sunlight glinting through the brown-gold hair, the curve of the chin, the slimness of the young, drooping body, veiled in its blue overall.

"Oh, do as you like!" she cried, "send your letter; but talk as little as you can to me about it! How do you suppose I like being told that you are sacrificing yourself for me? I can go to the workhouse in the last resort, like other people."

"Perhaps. But Pansy can't," said Virginia, a trifle rigidly. She took up the tray and disappeared.

. . . . . .

The day dragged by. To Virginia it seemed as if it would never end, and yet as if it were passing like a sigh. She felt as those who have been in a sinking ship have described themselves as feeling when the wave rose above the gunwale, and seemed to hesitate — to pause awfully — before it burst.

Pansy was very insistently eager to know what had passed between mamma and Mr. Gaunt the previous day. It was hard to stave off her pertinacious inquiry, but Virgie was able to tell her that negotiations were going on which might, or might not, lead to something. To-morrow would bring more news.

Thus the dawn broke upon the fatal day — a day of persistent fine rain which did nothing to abate the heat.

At about ten o'clock the loud imperative knock of a telegraph boy sounded upon the little door. Virginia took in the message. It was from Gaunt, and ran thus —

Please reply definitely to business offer, which otherwise is off.

The girl sat down, with knees shaking, staring at the message, which was reply paid. The boy waited whistling in the little entrance passage.

Should she give the definite answer demanded? Could she face the knowledge that all hope was over? She would not show her mother the despotic telegram. She knew that she must answer it for herself.

Taking a pencil she wrote:

Definite reply impossible till after visit. May we expect you?

She prepaid the reply to this, dismissed the boy, and walked into the kitchen with limbs shaking. She felt as if she had defied the robber chief who was holding them all to ransom.

It is difficult to describe the storm of excitement in which she awaited the second message. Her mother and Pansy both demanded the meaning of the double knock. She replied tranquilly to her mother that Mr. Gaunt had tried to extort a definite answer, which she had refused to give. Mrs. Mynors' cry: "Then he won't come after all?" was so tragic that the girl's heart contracted.

Within an hour she held in her hands the following remarkable sentence:

You gain nothing by delay. Arrive about four.

Virgie could not conceal from herself that it was relief which she experienced. Putting on her hat, she went out in the rain, down to the town, to the office of Mr. Askew, the solicitor, who had helped her with the agreement for Laburnum Villa, and in one or two other small matters. She asked him to come up that afternoon, at about half-

past four. Then she bought a few little cakes for tea, and returned home to arrange everything as spick and span as possible.

Her mother had insisted that the "supply" should be asked to come up for the afternoon, that their guest might not know of their servantless condition. Virginia was at first opposed to the idea, but after reflection she agreed. Mr. Gaunt must not think them too utterly in his power. She felt like the besieged citizens who threw loaves of bread over the walls, in order that the besiegers might suppose that they were living in plenty. Moreover, the presence of Mrs. Brown would ensure that Pansy and Tony were not neglected, but had tea at the proper time, Virgie being otherwise engaged.

Thus it was that Gaunt, on his arrival, was admitted by a responsible-looking middle-aged woman in a very clean apron, and shown into a room which, though tiny, was a bower of luxury.

Mrs. Mynors, beautifully gowned, rose from the downy Chesterfield to greet him. She thought he looked less vindictive, less ironical than he had seemed at their last meeting. After all, perhaps she had been fancying things!

"Well," he said, "so our young lady is considering the subject, as I foresaw she would do. She is her mother's own daughter."

Mrs. Mynors smothered her resentment at this extraordinary address. She was conscious of a hatred which was difficult to keep within bounds, but her own panic, when she knew that there was a doubt of his coming, had shown her something of what would be her frame of mind if Virginia declined to marry.

"Virginia," said she, "is by no means my own daughter. I am a wretched woman of business, whereas her head is as clear as a man's. She wishes to have all that

you propose to do for us embodied in a marriage settlement."

"Ha!" said Gaunt, as if delighted. The mother could hardly have made a more misleading statement. "Sharp young woman, indeed! Well, I respect her for that. There's no reason that I know of, for her to trust me. Where is she, by the bye? Has she entrusted the preliminaries to you?"

"No, she has not. She is acting quite independently in this matter," snapped Mrs. Mynors. "She is not quite of age, but I have always left her a great liberty of action. In fact, we have been more like sisters than mother and daughter." She dabbed her eyes daintily, and her voice was fraught with pathos.

"How charming!" said Gaunt gravely. "Did she remember having met me at the Wallace Collection?"

"Oh, yes, indeed she did! She remembered very well!" cried Mrs. Mynors, and her laugh was nearly as unpleasant as his own.

"Capital," was his comment. "All should go well then. Is love at first sight the proper cue, eh? Advise me. What do you think?"

For a moment the mask dropped. The real woman looked at him through the eyes of the elder Virginia. "I think you are a devil," she said distinctly.

He seemed much amused. "Well, perhaps you are not so far out this time. I told you that you were no fool. I thought you could be trusted to prepare the way for these difficult negotiations. Now may I see the lady of my heart?"

As he spoke, the door opened softly and Virginia walked in.

She wore her deceptive air of extreme elegance, and her prettiest frock. It was a costume grossly unsuited to the tiny villa, and she had hitherto worn it only in London.

Any man beholding her might have been pardoned for supposing her to be a luxury-loving idler, a girl who thought of little else but appearances.

Gaunt stood up. She approached him with a mingling of shyness and welcome; her manner seemed to trust him completely — to say that she knew herself safe in his hands. It might have made appeal to the veriest ruffian, had not his eye been jaundiced by his knowledge of her mother, and of their penniless circumstances. Her virginal modesty was to him merely consummate hypocrisy.

"Well," he said, "so I hear that you are not going to commit yourself until I stand committed too? Is that so?"

She laughed a little breathlessly. His non-smiling, dark face and big, rather hulking person were formidable, and she was conscious of fear.

"You said it was a business transaction, and business transactions ought to be business-like, ought they not?" she asked. She was speaking playfully, while her eyes sought his, as wanting to understand, to obtain some key to his curious behaviour. "It was kind of you to come, nevertheless," she added, with a hesitation born of his lack of response.

"I am a non-social, boorish kind of person," he said abruptly, after a pause, during which she withdrew herself and sat down. "I suppose I ought to begin with some kind of apology for such a blunt offer, hey? But I am told that young ladies nowadays like something out of the way; and you could fill in the details for yourself, I expect. You saw me admiring you that day in the Gallery, did you not?"

Again the eyes, so like, so unlike, her mother's, were lifted to those of the man who remembered each look and smile of twenty years back as if it had been yesterday.

"I noticed something special — something I could not

interpret — in your manner," was her gentle reply. "I told my friend that I thought you must imagine that you knew me. I was interested when mamma said that it was my likeness to her which drew your attention. I was glad to have it so well explained."

He leaned forward, intent upon her face and her down-bent gaze. "Well," he said, in a voice which thrilled her curiously, "perhaps you think that my suggestion is not quite so surprising, after all?"

Virginia made no reply. Her mother clenched her hands in rage, made some small movement, enough to attract his attention, and caught a ray of what was undoubtedly malice directed at her from under his heavy lids.

"Well," he went on, turning again to the girl, his tone subdued and almost gentle, "what do you say?"

She wavered — her colour came. Innocent and ignorant of life though she was, she yet felt the immensity of the step she was taking; but, strangely enough, the fact that the man gave her no help counted in his favour with her. His manner suggested some tremendous feeling, out of sight. His aloofness was like a fine and delicate consideration. The mocking quality in his address, so obvious to her mother, passed her by.

"Do you really think," she asked, her gaze still upon the ground, "that I am an adequate exchange for all the things you promise to do for — *them?*"

"Tell me now — enumerate — what have I promised to do for *them?*"

She lifted her eyes then. He was not looking at her, but brushing the sleeve of his coat where a crumb had fallen upon it. This avoidance gave her courage. "To educate Tony," said her voice, so fatally like her mother's in its cadenced sweetness, "to allow mother three hundred pounds a year, and to let Pansy have the best advice and treatment for her lameness."

"I admit all that, right enough. Anything more?"

"To settle five thousand pounds on me ——"

He looked in triumph at Mrs. Mynors. "Admirable!" he said, with a sarcasm which penetrated to the girl's intelligence with a shock. She broke off, startled.

"All right," he told her soothingly. "I agree to that too. Anything more?"

"Our solicitor, Mr. Askew, said there was another thing that I ought to ask," she replied, quite tranquilly. "It is that you should make a will in my favour, so that if anything happened to you, we should not be left destitute."

He once more let his mocking glance lash Mrs. Mynors. "I appreciate my future wife's business capacity," said he, "but I warn you that I am horribly healthy. Except for the accident which lamed me, I have not had a day's illness in my life. I fear I shan't oblige you by dying just yet."

Virgie grew pink. "Oh, I beg your pardon! That must have sounded very cold-blooded," she apologised. "But you said it was a business offer, did you not?"

He smiled for the first time. Dropping his voice to a low persuasiveness: "Did you quite believe that?" he asked.

Thus challenged, the truth in Virginia spoke. "No," she told him; "I thought it too extraordinary to be true."

"Besides," he persisted, still in that wooing undertone, "with a man who had seen you, it could hardly be, eh?"

Virgie held her breath. Something was here which was utterly beyond her. She was half terrified, half fascinated.

"Do you remember the statue on the landing at Hertford House?" he asked. The blood rushed to her cheeks now in headlong tide. *He* knew what brought it; her mother misinterpreted.

"When you had gone, I went and read the inscription," he pursued. "I told myself how true it was. Do you remember it? *Voici ton maître?*"

He sat and watched the memory, the pang that rent her. The sight of it seemed to give him real pleasure. He could trace the regret, the quiver of feeling, and he could say to himself: "She loves young Rosenberg, but she will marry me for my money. She deserves the punishment which I am going to inflict."

"So, you see, I am a wise man; I know when I am beaten," he went on smoothly. "I acknowledged my master when I found him."

The struggle in Virginia was keen. She was telling herself that this was Mr. Gaunt's highly unusual way of confessing himself attracted. If it were true that he already felt this strong inclination, then she must satisfy him; the marriage ought to be a success, since he had the desire to love, and she the will to please, to serve, to cherish. Yet there was an undernote, like the boom of the far-away storm in the voice of a calm sea. This alarmed her, for she did not understand it.

To steady herself and hide her embarrassment she rose and went to the tea-table, at which she seated herself, pouring the tea and dispensing it with the noticeable grace which characterised her least important actions.

She noticed that her mother was shedding tears, and the sight caused her to make a great effort and launch into small talk — of the late heat, and the rain, and the climate of Wayhurst. Small support did she receive from either of her companions; and by the time that Gaunt had eaten a slice of cake and drunk two cups of tea, his patience seemed suddenly to give out.

"Come, then," he asked suddenly, "have we arranged matters, subject to your finding the business side of the transaction in good order?"

Thus confronted with the bald issue, Virgie felt as if he had slapped her in the face; but in a moment she had rallied. He had promised to give her all she asked. Could she, logically, do aught else but accept? She clasped her hands tightly in her lap, hesitated, rose, and went to the window, gazing forth upon the little wet street. Over the way, at Alpine Cottage, the pug had managed to get shut out in the rain. It was astonishing how often he did this. It was the one thing that seriously displeased his prim and elderly mistress. Virgie's mind caught at the trifling fact, the little bit of her daily life, as if its consideration could protect her against the awful decision which loomed ahead.

"If you want to stipulate for other things, now is your time," said Gaunt, rising and coming towards her. It was but a step, for the room was tiny. "For instance, don't you want it put in the settlements that you should have so many months in town every year, or that I should give you a motor? I haven't got a motor, I must warn you."

Here was something that she could answer without hesitation. She turned to him her lovely, tender smile. "Oh, all that! Why, I shall be your wife," she sweetly answered him.

There was a tingling silence after this artless speech. Gaunt's face fell. He looked as though a momentary doubt assailed him. Then he realised that he must seize the chance she thus unwittingly gave him of assuming her consent.

"Ah! then you can think of yourself as my wife?" He turned his face to where Mrs. Mynors sat like a woman hypnotised. "Then we are engaged!" he cried. "I am such a crusted old provincial bachelor that I did not provide for this occasion before I left town by the purchase of a ring. But I see upon your mother's finger a jewel

which, if I mistake not, belongs to me." He approached the sofa with hand outstretched. "Thank you, madam. It seems to me a most touching idea that the mother and daughter should wear the same betrothal ring." He held it out to Virginia.

"Put it on," he said.

Virginia wavered. She looked from the man to the woman, bewildered with the invisible clash of feelings which she could not interpret. Mrs. Mynors hid her face behind her perfumed wisp of lawn; but, then, she would have done that in any case at such a moment as her daughter's betrothal. Gaunt's eyes were alight, but, as it were, a-smoulder; there was no flame in their glance.

Turning very white, the girl took the ring from him and obediently slipped it upon her finger.

"Done!" he said, in tones of boundless satisfaction. "Now we come to definite arrangements." He seated himself again, but Virginia remained standing as if something had turned her to stone. "I live a very busy life at Omberleigh," he told her briskly, "farming my own land; and my estate is a big one. I must go down there to-night to superintend the end of the hay harvest, and I must stay there a few days in order to prepare the house for your reception. I should like to be married this day week if that will suit you. As we both live in our own parishes, there will be no difficulty about a licence. It is not possible for me to take a honeymoon at this time of year, so I shall carry you straight back to Derbyshire after the ceremony."

"Wait — wait. No, no, Osbert, this is preposterous!" broke in Mrs. Mynors. "This cannot be. Virginia does not know you; she is all unprepared. Such haste is — improper! I will not have it."

He looked as obstinate as a mule with its ears laid back. "Sorry," he said. "On this matter I shall be obliged to

insist. I must be married before we begin to reap, and it is going to be a very early harvest this year. Don't make difficulties. Remember that you profess to be very hard up, and I don't begin to make you any allowance until your daughter is my wife."

Virginia was reflecting. "If they told me I was to have an operation I would rather have it at once, than be left to think about it."

She spoke suddenly. "Mother, I can be ready," she said gently. "Let it be as Mr. Gaunt thinks best."

"Excellent!" said the bridegroom. "Your mother tells me that she allows you complete independence of action, so we will take this as settled. Is that your solicitor now entering the gate? I will give him my instructions at once with your permission, for I must go back to London by the six train to catch the express to Ashbourne."

CHAPTER VIII

INTO THE UNKNOWN

"Graceful as an ivy bough
Born to cling and lean,
Thus she sat to sing and sew. . . .
When she raised her lustrous eyes
A beast peeped at the door."— CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

MR. ASKEW stood at the window, watching the figure of the prospective bridegroom limping down the road. He turned his mild eyes back to the two ladies within the room with something like wonder in their depths.

"Miss Virginia, I congratulate you," he said almost reverently. "You have indeed found a generous husband."

"You think — you are of opinion — that his generosity is exceptional?" faltered Mrs. Mynors.

"Exceptional? But, my *dear* madam, it is unheard of! Strong indeed must be the attachment! He told me," added the kind old man, with a smile of appreciation at the bride-elect, "that it was a case of love at first sight. Miss Virginia has made a conquest worth boasting of!"

Virginia stood gazing anxiously at the speaker. She longed to ask if he was quite sure that her future husband was sane; but such a question must appear too eccentric for her to venture upon it. Fortunately, the next words of the lawyer practically answered it.

"And such a grasp of business! Such a fine, keen intelligence! He tells me that he runs his estate at a profit, has all these new intensive culture ideas, and plenty

of capital to carry them out. A fine fortune, indeed! One wonders how it chances that such a man has remained so long a bachelor!"

Mrs. Mynors bridled, but said nothing. Virginia absorbed the sense of the opinion just given with considerable relief. The information respecting Gaunt's scientific cultivation of his land interested her. Her own father, living on his hereditary acres, had been in like manner devoted to the soil. At Lissendean, however, the land had starved to supply the constantly increasing demands of the mistress of the house; and the shadow of the approaching, inevitable bankruptcy had paralysed all planning, and embittered the premature illness and death of a chivalrous and simple gentleman.

The thought that this free life, of tramping over fields and through spinneys, of riding across one's own acres, and watching the response of the earth to the hand of man, might once more be hers, went far to reconcile the new Andromeda to her lot. The manner and appearance of her suitor had rather puzzled than hurt her. He had pleaded solitude and boorishness as a reason for his extraordinarily abrupt tactics. If he atoned for his surprising rudeness in the matter (for instance) of her mother's ring by being good to his wife, and allowing her to have Pansy to stay with her, then she might be so nearly happy that she need waste little regret upon her own action in shutting upon her youth the gate of dreams. Softly she stole from the room, leaving her mother still in talk with Mr. Askew, finding out all she could as to the extent of her son-in-law's means; and privately speculating as to how far it would be prudent to exceed the miserable allowance which he proposed to make her.

Virginia went upstairs to Pansy's room to console the child for her disappointment in not having seen her future brother. Shyly the elder sister, when Gaunt was taking

leave, had suggested a moment's visit to the little invalid. She had been curtly refused. He had barely time in which to catch his train to London. By way of comfort, Virgie now enlarged upon the big, beautiful garden at Omberleigh, wherein, of course, Pansy would ere long find herself installed. Eagerly the child noticed and remarked upon the beautiful ring which her sister wore. She had not previously seen it, and was naturally kept in ignorance of its somewhat humiliating history.

"I wonder what else he will send you, Virgie," said the child eagerly. "I expect that before long lovely wedding presents will begin to come. What dress shall you buy to be married in, darling?"

"I shan't buy any," was the calm reply. "We are to be married with nobody there but mother and Tony, at ten o'clock in the morning, and I shall have to travel back to Omberleigh afterwards. I shall just wear my frock that you are so fond of, with the chiffon tunic, and take a dust-coat to church with me."

Pansy was inclined to be disappointed, but Virginia showed her how impossible it was for her to spend money which they had not got, and how far more honourable she felt it to be going to her marriage in things which had been paid for.

Busy days they were for Virgie, for she had to engage a good, competent servant for Laburnum Villa, and also to make arrangements with their doctor for Pansy to try the treatment he had always been so eager to recommend. Everything had to be so ordered that it might be fully in train by the wedding day, that her mother should not feel too much inconvenienced by the departure of her devoted maid-of-all-work.

Perhaps the most difficult task of all that fell to the bride was the writing of her news to Miriam Rosenberg. Long did she sit with the tip of her penholder laid thought-

fully on her lip, her eyes gazing gravely forth, but seeing nothing. She felt the extraordinary circumstances needed some handling. She must try to put things in their most favourable light without actually violating truth. And it was only a few days before her day of doom that she finally achieved the following:

My dearest Mims,

I am writing a line to tell you a piece of news which will, I think, astonish you. I am going to be married! More surprising still, I am going to be married next Tuesday! It sounds wild, I know, considering that when I was with you there was no such idea; but it is not quite as sudden as it seems, for Mr. Gaunt is a very old friend, and knew mother before I was born. He is being most incredibly good, and is to provide for mother, Pansy and Tony. Is it not wonderful? Like a story in a book. He lives in Derbyshire, and has a big estate, so I shall be in the country, as in old days — and you know how I love a country life. When we are settled down, you must come and stay with us.

Nobody is invited to the wedding, Mr. Gaunt having no near relative. It is to be early in the morning, with only mother and Tony present, as we have a long way to go afterwards.

I send you much love, and I shall never forget all your goodness to me.— Your constant friend,

VIRGINIA MYNORS.

For the two days which followed the despatch of this letter Virginia lived in secret suspense. She did not really believe that there was any likelihood that Perseus, in the handsome person of Gerald Rosenberg, would arrive to unchain her from her rock; yet the tiny chance that he might fought and struggled within her. Each

time the postman passed she felt her heart lift in her side. Each time the bell rang she wondered whether there might not be a tall figure waiting on the other side of the door.

As might have been expected, no such thing happened. A letter came from Mims by return of post, full of congratulation and excitement, and stating that a consignment of wedding presents had been despatched. In fact, Mr. Rosenberg, senior, was so transported with gratitude to Virginia for refraining from becoming his daughter-in-law that he bestowed on her a set of ermine furs fit for a princess. Mims sent a mirror in a silver frame; Gerald a pendant.

Except for a silver cream-jug from Mr. Askew, these were the only presents the girl received. Tony and Pansy almost broke their hearts at being unable to give anything, until Mrs. Mynors, roused to most unexpected generosity, allowed them to go shares with her in pressing upon Virgie's acceptance some articles of her mother's silver toilet set — brush, comb, and so on.

Small time had the bride for reflection, until the dawn of the fatal day.

The rain had changed the weather. The heat was no longer great — in fact, the day was chilly and grey, with a gusty little wind which blew up the dust in sudden puffs.

The bride's toilette, of pale blue over white, was extremely pretty. As she stood in the drawing-room awaiting the fly which would drive her, her mother and Tony to the church, Mrs. Mynors thought she had never seen a more perfect picture of girlish fairness. Excitement and nervous trepidation had chased the pallor with which a sleepless night had invested her. Up to the last moment she had been at work upon this and that — rearranging her own room to accommodate the professional nurse who would be in charge of Pansy during her treatment, trying to think out and plan everything so exactly that her

mother would not be able to upset it afterwards. It was not until nearly two o'clock in the morning that she finished her own packing, and lay down to the thoughts of unspeakable dread with which she now knew that she regarded her approaching marriage.

Since the day of Gaunt's visit her mother had hardly spoken to her. Her silence was not exactly hostile, but it was very wounding. It was as though she had suddenly discovered that her daughter was not the girl she took her to be; as if the poor child was abandoning her home and duties to make a rich marriage — leaving her mother to pine in the little villa, cut off from all her own set. There was nothing to take hold of, nothing that Virginia could plead against; it was just an atmosphere of coldness, of pained surprise, but it seemed to the depressed girl to be the last straw.

With her usual patience she shouldered the burden and bore it. She guessed, with her quick, sensitive sympathy, that perhaps it hurt mamma less to adopt this attitude. Her daughter was sacrificing herself to her family. To admit this stunning weight of obligation must, of course, be painful. Mamma always shrank from painful things. She had discovered this pose of hers as a kind of refuge from humiliation. Virgie accepted it meekly. Nevertheless, the tears which it wrung from her in the darkness of her last night at home were bitter, and could not be checked for a long time.

The knowledge that Gaunt was in the town, that he had arrived by the last train the previous night, and was putting up at the Ducal Arms near the station, seemed to render sleep impossible. She could not tell why. Not till five o'clock had struck was she compelled by mere exhaustion to close her eyes.

All her life Virginia had been a poor eater, and the least excitement was wont to deprive her of appetite. As

a result of this, she had eaten, during the past ten days, barely enough to keep her alive. There was nobody to notice what she ate, or whether she took a sufficient quantity. As she had been under-nourished for the last two years, with the sole exception of her fortnight with the Rosenbergs, during great part of which mental agitation had made it difficult for her to eat, she was in a state of real debility. Wholly inadequate did she feel for what lay before her — the new beginning, the effort to understand the unknown being whom she was to marry, the settling into strange surroundings. Her weakness and discouragement were so profound that, by the time she had arisen, dressed for church, and passed through the sharp and biting agony of her parting from Pansy, she was reduced to a state of passive endurance.

All the way to church she talked feverishly, eagerly to Tony of what they would do in the future. She would pay his pocket money out of her own allowance. He was to join the school O.T.C. at once, so that he might go into camp at the end of term. . . .

In such plans as these lay her only anodyne.

Her mother was reduced to complete silence. Mrs. Mynors — in her own opinion — was the interesting and tragic heroine of this occasion. She, in all her beauty, all her desolation, had been passed by in favour of her inexperienced, immature daughter. The pathos of her position — left in Laburnum Villa while Virginia went to take up a place in county society — flooded her with self-pity. Never had she felt capable of such an intensity of emotion as upon this day, when she was carried helpless to church to give her daughter away. Never had she come so near to being primally and brutally elementary as at the moment when the carriage stopped at the church door, and Gaunt came forward, greeting her with:

"Good morning, my mother-in-law!"

She drew in her breath with a sound like a moan; but in a flash she had seen that she must make no manifestation. The time for that had gone by. As she moved up the church, side by side with her daughter, she realised two things, sharply and simultaneously. One, that she could and ought to have prevented this marriage; the other, that it was now too late.

What was Gaunt's plan she could not exactly know. If it was simply to mortify her, then she could not see why he should be unkind to Virgie. Yet she distrusted and feared him; and she had given no warning to the simple creature at her side, going like a lamb to the slaughter, blind to all life's mysterious issues, blind to the sinister motive which her mother so clearly saw behind Gaunt's eccentric marriage. For Virginia, the old truth held good, that at the actual moment one ceases to realise what is happening. The service struck her with a sense of detachment. She heard it with interest, almost for the first time. The vows were, indeed, comprehensive. One had, however, the comforting knowledge that the vowing was mutual. He promised things as well as she. There was a curious consolation in the reflection that he vowed to love, cherish, and even worship his wife. There seemed nothing detached about his own participation in the rite. He grasped her fingers so strongly as to be almost painful as he vowed "to have and to hold."

And now it was done, and there was no more use in wondering whether one had been right or wrong.

The bare and unadorned service was quickly over. The elderly vicar read a short and platitudinous address to the newly married out of a small pastoral book. Gaunt took his wife's hand, placed it on his arm, and marched her into a stuffy, small vestry, wherein she was to write for the last time her name, Virginia Mynors.

She wrote it; and turning, fixed her troubled gaze upon

her mother with an expression so bewildered, so lost, that it pierced even through the crust of egotism. Mrs. Mynors began to gasp hysterically, but, after a momentary fight for composure, managed to say, "Osbert, Osbert, I conjure you! Be good to her! Be good to my Virgie!"

"My dear mother-in-law, I promise you that Virgie shall have the treatment she deserves," was his reply. "Come, Mrs. Gaunt, we must be off, if we are to catch the London train."

Virginia was now quite numb. She took his arm because he offered it, and because there seemed nothing else to do. They were at the church door. She broke away from Gaunt to fling her arms round Tony. The boy was radiant, showing her with glowing eyes a sovereign which his new brother-in-law had just bestowed. The sight did more to encourage the bride than might be supposed. She kissed her mother next, finding it out of the question to give any parting message or direction, because the attempt to articulate would let loose a flood of feeling hardly complimentary to her husband.

Then she was in the carriage, alone with the man who was to walk through life at her side. Still the merciful numbness held her.

Gaunt, in an unconcerned way, said he thought they had better lunch at the Savoy, and she agreed, not knowing what he meant. He made one or two other trifling remarks concerning the disposal of her luggage, which awaited them at the station.

They found the train, and he put her in, walking away himself, and returning with the news that all the trunks were safe, and in the van. He laid upon her lap a pile of magazines and one or two novels.

"I hate talking in a train," he remarked. She could have loved him for such marvellous consideration.

He had a small bag, stuffed with legal-looking docu-

ments, which he diligently perused. Virginia, thus released momentarily from strain, lay back against the cushions. The breeze fluttered into the carriage, sweet with the breath of summer. She tried to rest, and not to think. It was impossible not to think, however. Her thoughts were glued, as it were, to the consideration of this man to whom she was so strangely tied.

"He loved me at first sight. He guessed who I was. He got into communication with mother in order to be introduced. He suggested marriage there and then. When will he begin to woo me? What will he tell me? What shall I answer? Shall I be able to help flinching, from letting him see how abjectly afraid I am?"

He did not put her to the test. Was it possible that he divined her exhaustion, and respected it?

She was still wondering when the non-stop express ran into the terminus.

He put her into a taxi while he went and looked after their baggage. Then he rejoined her, and directed the driver to the Savoy Hotel.

They secured a table near the window, whence could be seen the waters of the Thames, the endless movement of the traffic on the Embankment and the brilliant flowers of the public gardens.

The beauty of it revived Virgie a little. She ate some lunch, drank a glass of champagne, and began to make small, shy comments upon the scene, to which her husband listened tolerantly, but not as though interested. She reflected that she must seem to him altogether young and childish.

Her slender grace and charm drew many eyes. As Gaunt glanced about him, he was keenly conscious of this. Presently he leant back with the smile that his mother-in-law hated.

"Glad you are pleased," said he. "Make the most

of it. You are going to be buried in the heart of the country from to-day onward."

She laughed lightly. "That will be no hardship," said she. "What I should not like would be to be buried in the heart of London. The walls in London seem as if they must fall down and crush you — so near together. Have you ever felt that?"

"I don't like London."

"Then that is one taste we share," said she thoughtfully, leaning back to survey him. "How strange that I should know so little of your tastes! We shall have to begin at the very beginning, shall we not?"

"The beginning of what?" asked Gaunt.

"Of acquaintanceship," she answered.

"Pardon me. I know you through and through. You have not a taste, a habit, nor an idea that I am not intimately acquainted with. Gives me an unfair advantage, does it not?"

"If it's true, it does indeed; but I don't think it is true," was her frank answer.

He gave something between a grunt and a laugh. "You are not competent to form an opinion," he replied, looking at his watch. "It is now five minutes to two," he went on, "and our train leaves St. Pancras at four. What will you do? I am going to have a smoke. Perhaps you would like to lie down and rest a while — eh?"

It was so exactly what she craved that she thought his sympathy wonderful. That he was dismissing her to solitude on her wedding day, while he smoked, did not occur to her. She thanked him quite eagerly, a maid was summoned, and she was shown into a room with a deliciously downy bed. The maid removed her hat, took off her shoes, drew the blinds, and left, promising to call her in plenty of time.

She could not sleep, but the silence and the recumbent posture helped her. She went down to the entrance hall after her rest, feeling much more able to endure the remainder of her journey than she had dared to hope.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TRAP

"'Sit fast — dost fear? — The moon shines clear —
Fleet goes my barb — keep hold!
Fearst thou?'—'Oh, no!' she faintly said;
'But why so stern and cold?'" — SCOTT.

VIRGIE awoke, so to speak, from her numbness in the train, somewhere between London and Derby.

She was sitting, with her pile of light literature and fashion papers, opposite the man who had married her, and who was to all appearance immersed in the folios of blue foolscap, which he was marking here and there with red pencil. The documents, so far as she could judge, were leases.

The motion of the train had lulled her into a short nap, and it seemed as if quite suddenly she was wide awake, and pinching herself to make sure that it was not all a dream. Here was a man who had, as it were, leaped at a girl, and married her in such hot haste that there was no time for reflection. One argued, one assumed, the strong feeling which made such behaviour credible. Yet now he sat, as a man twenty years married might sit, marking passages in a lease with red pencil, while his few hours' bride, in all her delicate loveliness, faced him, neglected, ignored.

Surely this was puzzling!

Had she but known, her own demeanour was much more surprising to him than his could be to her. He was wondering when an outburst of wounded vanity would come, how much longer she could refrain from comment

upon his behaviour. Surely she must be piqued beyond endurance, she who imagined herself to have captured his heart at a glance, and was doubtless pondering the question of exactly what her conquest represented, in money, luxury, and pleasure.

His seemingly absorbed attention had, as a fact, hardly wandered from her for an instant since they met that morning; and the results of his observations were not according to his expectation. So far, she had not merely been pliant, she had seemed grateful for kindness. Of course he knew her to be badly frightened. At the Savoy, for a few minutes, under the influence of gay surroundings and champagne, there had been, as he thought, a glimpse of the real woman — the coquette incarnate. It had vanished, however, the moment he set his heavy hand thereon.

Now she sat before him in her Dresden china daintiness, a picture of luxury, carefully tended down to her very finger-nails. While she slept he had perused the features that moved him so vitally — the well remembered breadth of brow and pointedness of chin, the deep setting of the shadowy eyes, the lines of the throat, the base of which rose milky from its setting of misty chiffon.

As soon as she stirred, he returned to his blue foolscap. Now she was returning his compliment — studying him.

Reluctantly she found that experience was confirming the judgment she had formed instantaneously at Hertford House. She did not like her husband's face, and could hardly say why this was so, since in a virile, somewhat rough-hewn fashion, his features were good. She was just saying to herself, "It is the expression that is wrong; it must be the expression," when he raised his head, met her eyes, and smiled in the way she was learning to dislike.

"Well, don't you think I am an ideal husband?" he asked.

She answered his smile. "That remains to be seen," she countered.

"At least," he said, "I fulfil the one essential condition, don't I? The one thing needful for husbands?"

"What is that?"

"Why, a long purse, of course."

She coloured warmly, and showed, by downcast eye and close-pressed lips, how this wounded. She felt that she had nothing to say in reply, except a low, reproachful, "Oh!" in the shock of such an unkindness.

"Not very tactful of me, was it, to taunt you with the amiable weakness which has procured me the lifelong privilege of your society?"

"Amiable weakness?" she repeated vaguely.

"The woman's desire for physical comforts, luxury, and so on, at any cost."

"Oh," murmured Virgie, "I don't think — indeed, I'm sure you don't understand."

"No? We must discuss the matter at greater length; but as I told you this morning, I dislike talking in the train. We shall be at Luton in a minute, and I telegraphed for a tea-basket."

The train slowed down as he spoke. He rose, leaned from the window, and took the tray from the boy who was waiting on the platform.

Virginia poured out the tea, and dispensed the bread and butter and cake with a sinking heart.

Of all the things she had anticipated, unkindness from her newly made husband had been farthest from her thoughts. Her maiden terrors had concerned themselves in the opposite direction. She had feared demonstrative display of feeling which as yet she must be unable to reciprocate. His attitude froze her timid efforts to make friends. The remaining words that passed between them during the journey were negligible, except for once, when

he looked up suddenly — they were passing a lonely stretch of moorland, and he had been gazing from the window — and said:

"So you think you will like living in the country?"

"I know I shall. I have always lived in the country," she replied.

"Not with me," was his comment, while a faint smile crossed his eyes.

"No. Not with you," was her gentle answer.

She wanted to speak to him, to tell him how well she meant to keep her new-made vows, that though her marriage was, as he must know, a marriage of convenience, she intended to do her duty to the utmost limit of her powers. But he said he did not like talking in the train; and her spirits were so exhausted that she dare not risk a breakdown. She remained, therefore, rapt in the silence which seemed the sole alternative, until they reached their journey's end.

A brougham awaited them, drawn by a pair of fine horses. There followed a drive of more than five miles through country which grew each moment wilder and more beautiful. They came at last to a pine wood, set among swelling uplands. A lodge gate here flanked the road, and as the lodge-keeper's child opened it, and touched his forelock, Virginia guessed that they were in their own domain.

The trees were so thick and dark as to produce a premature twilight. Through this they drove for the best part of a mile. The name of Omberleigh could be well understood. It was, indeed, a place of shadows. The house stood in the depths of the wood, so far as the side from which they approached was concerned. It was a Georgian house, straight and square, with a classic porch of grey stone, supported upon columns.

The house door stood open, and revealed a dark hall,

somewhat untidy, and furnished with big black cupboards, surmounted by foxes' masks, antlers, and stuffed fish. On its shabby turkey carpet stood an elderly man-servant, a middle-aged parlourmaid, and a grey-haired woman who was presumably a cook-housekeeper. All of them looked as though they were patiently trying to grapple with undeserved calamity in the shape of a new mistress.

"Mrs. Wells, this is my wife," said Gaunt, in tones that sounded as if he were trying to conceal his triumph.

"I am sure I wish you joy, ma'am," replied Mrs. Wells, with an implied despair of the fulfilment of any such wish.

Virginia was used to a large household. She slipped off her glove, and shook hands kindly with Mrs. Wells. "Thank you so much. I am sure I shall be happy in this beautiful place," said she cordially.

"This is Hemming, who has been with me a great many years," went on Gaunt, indicating the man-servant, who murmured, "Namely fifteen," as he glanced at the fair creature standing there, who looked, as he afterwards remarked, like a fairy strayed in from the woods.

"And this is Grover, who will wait upon you," he went on. "Grover, you had better take Mrs. Gaunt straight upstairs. Hemming, let the men carry up the luggage into Mrs. Gaunt's room forthwith."

"This way, ma'am," said Grover, distantly. She took the dust-cloak which Virgie had slipped off, flashing a glance of reluctant admiration as she did so at the pretty frock displayed. The staircase was on the dark side of the house, and the corridor above seemed very sombre to the girl as she followed her guide.

Her bedroom was big and old-fashioned, with three high sash windows, set deep in the walls. This lay on the other side of the house, and the bride stepped forward into the full glory of a sunset, far over land which sloped away

downward in a wide prospect. The aspect of this side of the house was south with a touch of west.

Grover was pleased at the involuntary cry of pleasure which the new mistress gave as she went to one of the windows and gazed out. She thawed a little as she pointed out to the eager girl the fine hill which was the pride of their part of the county, Gladby Top.

The men brought up the boxes, and by the time she had arrayed Virginia in the frock which young Mr. Bent so much admired in Bryanston Square, Grover had laid aside the greater part of her resentment, and was inclined to think that very few of the neighbouring families could show anything in the way of a bride approaching the quality of the specimen just brought to Omberleigh.

"You can excuse him and understand him, if you take what I mean," she said later on in the kitchen. "Most times there's really no knowing what it is as takes their fancy when they get to his age. But with her — well, I don't see how he could help himself! If she was to be had, right he was to snap her up. What seems odd to me is that she should have taken him, for you can see she's a tip-topper — none of your soap-makers' daughters, but real gentry."

Grover showed the bride downstairs into the drawing-room with an uncomfortable feeling that it was not an adequate setting for so fair and youthful a presence. Virginia had not lingered over her dressing, and found that there was half an hour yet before the dinner would be served. She stood in the long, bare room, probably last re-furnished in the '60's, and gazed about her forlornly. This room was on the sunny side of the house, and its windows opened upon a paved terrace with an Italian balustrade in stone.

She strayed across the Brussels carpet to the window, and stood there gazing out upon the falling slopes of a

garden — yes, a garden — but as it seemed to her a somewhat bare one. There was just enough bedding-out to make a meagre display; but when she thought of the flaming herbaceous flowers which ought to fill those long border edgings, of the Alpine plants which ought to bloom from every cleft in those limestone walls, she sighed at the thought of wasted opportunities. The tastes of the master of the house were not for horticulture, it appeared.

The thought of his sneer at her for a mercenary marriage rushed to her mind. This husband — this stranger — what manner of man was he? What was to be her fate at his hands? The doubt and terror turned her blood to water. She put her two hands to her throat to keep down the swelling sobs. Then she turned swiftly, instinctively backward, and saw that Gaunt had noiselessly entered, and stood just behind her.

"Well," he said, "it is done now. The trap has closed behind you, and you cannot get out. What do you think of your life-sentence?"

A sudden determination came to her not to show fear. His manner was that of one grimly jesting. She answered playfully, "I think my jailer likes to tease."

"Well," he went on, "you walked into the snare with your eyes open. You knew nothing of me, did you, beyond the one glorious fact that I am rich? Nothing else mattered. My negligence, my rudeness, my neglect, could not drive you from your purpose. True daughter of Virginia Sheringham, you have made your bed, and now you must lie upon it."

His wife's eyes flashed, and her answer came clearly. "Pardon me! You say that I knew nothing of you but that you were rich. That is not true. I knew that you were a man of whom my own mother thought so well that she engaged herself to marry you. I knew also — or

guessed — that you were lonely and unhappy. I could see that you were — lame."

"What?" he cut her off short. "You have the assurance to tell me to my face that my infirmity was a reason for your marrying me? You thought that you could elude the vigilance of a lame man — was that it? But though I limp I am no cripple. In fact, I am particularly active — active enough to guard you very carefully, as I warn you."

Bewildered, roused to hot indignation though she now was, Virginia felt her spirits rise defiant to meet this bullying tone. "A husband should guard his wife, and I hope you will guard me," she replied promptly, "but you speak as though you intended to hold me captive. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," he said, measuring his words, and keeping his eyes steadily upon her, "to undertake the task of your reformation. I am going to turn you into something human — into a feeling, breathing, and, if necessary, a suffering woman. I am going to take away your false standards, to humble your vanity, to mortify your avarice. You shall see yourself, Virginia Gaunt, as you really are! Your outward beauty, upon which you trade, as your mother traded, is nothing to me but a whip, reminding me of the fool I was in my youth. I saw you first, using your lure, casting your net, hoping to secure young Rosenberg as your escape from poverty and debt. You nearly succeeded; you would have succeeded had not your friend belonged to a race which likes to have its money's-worth. You blush — yes, that shows the truth of my surmise. He would doubtless have been a more congenial solution of your problem than I; but he, alas, was not available! So you took me! And so you were very careful about the settlements! But there were things for which you forgot to stipulate — and those you must learn to do without!"

She was white now. Only her force of will kept her upon her feet. The insulting words stormed at her brain, and filled her with despair.

"You say this to me — *to your wife.* Is it fair, do you think? . . . I have not deceived you. You never asked me to give you love. I mean to keep my promises, without the goad of threats. . . . If — if I did wrong, in accepting what you offered, I am sorry. I want to do my duty, if you will help me . . . but don't make it too — difficult."

"Excellent!" he commented. "A picture of wifely submission! We shall make something of you yet — perhaps in time. Meanwhile, it is as well to warn you that yours is to be no life of luxury. You must work, my girl — work, do you hear?"

"That will be nothing new," she replied tremulously. "I am used to hard work."

He laughed out. She looked like a creature whom the weariness of toil had never touched. He was so convinced of her idleness and frivolity that he could see nothing else.

"Work? You look like it. Your mother looks like it too. She fluttered into her Dover Street Club, clad like Solomon in all his glory, and with no more concern about the cost of her finery than the lilies of the field. The only work that women like you understand is how to spend money. That's your vocation, the business of your life! How to catch some man and wring from him the means to indulge your desires."

He was mounted on his hobby now, and his words came with a sudden fluency for which his previous taciturnity made her unprepared. "She was quite young — young enough to have been unworldly, you would have thought — when she jilted a poor man to marry a rich one. In spite of that innocent exterior, she was as clever as a pickpocket, as cautious as a Jew. Afterwards I remembered

how carefully she had questioned me as to the likelihood of my coming into this property. There was a life between me and it. She was not taking any chances! . . . But, after all, the life failed. I came into my inheritance not so many years after my jilting . . . and, by the Lord! when she was a needy widow and I was a rich man, she would have married me, had I so much as held up a finger. Do you deny it?"

Virginia could hardly breathe. If the hands she had clutched when drowning had contracted about her throat and held her down under water, she might have felt something the same consternation. Love! Love at first sight! Why, the man loathed her.

"But," she brought out breathlessly, "if this — if this is what you think of me, why — why have you married me?"

"I'll tell you why. I married because I am siren-proof, and I am going to reform you. You're young; you may not be irreclaimable. We'll see if I can change your nature; but if I can't do that, I swear I will control your actions. For the first time in your life, you are going to be disciplined. The starting-point for your training is that you should be completely cut off from your past. Therefore, you will not again see any of the members of your family, either here, or elsewhere. You need not look so incredulous. I carry out the things I undertake. Don't suppose you can escape from me."

The hatred in his voice was the outcome of twenty years of morbid egotism. The very atrocity of his amazing tirade helped his wife to rally. All her dignity, all her good breeding, came now to her support.

She spoke low but steadily. "It is true that I cannot escape. I bound myself this morning, by vows which to me are more binding than cords. But let me remind you that you also took vows — to love and to cherish."

He bowed ironically. "Oh, be sure that I shall cherish my piece of perfection," he replied, "and, when I have broken her to harness, I may reward her with my affection."

Her face, as she met his look, merited study. She had found a source of consolation in her misery — the consciousness of her own immense height above him. Terror, which had been succeeded by disgust, now disappeared altogether in sheer contempt.

"You have made us quits," she said simply. "This morning I felt myself under a great weight of obligation. Now you have paid yourself in full, paid yourself in insult to a helpless woman."

"Take care! Take care what you say to me!" he cried, swayed by a tumult of inexplicable feeling.

She made no answer. Only she faced him, no longer afraid, but coldly critical. Her look was almost pitying. As they stood confronted, the man had a curious experience. Her wonderful likeness to her mother vanished utterly, and he saw a woman strange to him not only in person but in type — a type as yet unknown.

There was a pause, which was broken by the roll of the gong in the hall. Gaunt started. Hemming threw open the door and announced dinner.

Caught at such a moment, the master of the house, to his annoyance, was taken aback and hesitated. His wife did not seem to share his embarrassment. With her head held high she advanced the few steps which separated them, and laid her hand upon his arm.

Together they walked out into the hall, under the respectful but close observation of the butler, and entered the dining-room, a dark and gloomy apartment, on the wooded north side of the house.

Here dinner was laid, in the style of a half-century ago. To Gaunt's surprise, his wife began to talk almost at

once. She spoke of the glorious view from the window of her room, inquired the height of Gladby Top, and mentioned her own taste for gardening. After a few minutes of moody uncertainty, Gaunt joined in her attempt to keep up appearances; and it was not until Hemming and Grover had placed dessert upon the table and left the room that the inevitable silence fell.

CHAPTER X

ANDROMEDA

"Up she looked, down she looked, round at the mead,
Straight at the castle, that's best indeed
To look at, from outside the walls. . . .
And up, like a weary yawn, with its pulleys,
Went, in a shriek, the rusty portcullis;
And, like a glad sky the north wind sullies,
The lady's face stopped its play
As if her first hair had grown grey."— BROWNING.

THE final closing of the door upon Hemming, as he discreetly retired, seemed to the bride to fill the gloomy room with reverberations. The door was not banged, yet she heard its echoing dying away like a murmur in cavernous heights. She had an illusion of being in some dark sea-cave, into which the tide would slowly crawl and swallow her up. Her feet were cold, as though the first shallow waves already laved them.

All through the dinner she had been putting a strain upon herself. She was now near the breaking-point. Gaunt was pouring wine from the heavy, stumpy cut-glass decanter into a wine-glass. She heard the lip of the bottle clink, as though his hand were not quite steady.

As usual in moments of stress her appetite had forsaken her. She had seemed to help herself to the various dishes, and had played with her knife and fork, so that Gaunt, from his end of the table, did not notice that she ate practically nothing. Before leaving the room, Hemming had handed her a dish of fine strawberries. These she felt she could eat. She took some cream, broke the fruit with a fork, and ate with thankfulness that she had some

mechanical process with which to fill in this hollow pause before the commencement of what she felt might be definite hostilities.

The moments lengthened. He did not speak nor raise his eyes; but as soon as she laid down her spoon, he lifted his head, and said abruptly:

"Come here!"

Virgie jumped. The attack was indeed sudden. For a moment she wavered, then rose and moved noiseless down the length of the floor, along the edge of the table, until she stood beside him.

He leaned back, contemplating her. More than ever she looked like the princess in a fairy-tale. Her dress was cut and fashioned with the mystic skill that belongs to very few of the daughters of our race. It was subtle; it had a disturbing effect. There was a general impression of charm — elusive and faintly fragrant — of a finished work of art, from the curve of the soft hair to the satin of the small shoes.

"You are quite as good an actress as I supposed," remarked her husband, with satisfaction.

She pondered this for a minute. Then: "You mean that I kept up appearances before the servants? That is second nature with me, I think — hardly acting. But I thought I was doing what you would wish?"

He placed his hands upon the table edge, pushing his chair back slightly on its hind legs, while he looked up at her. Again he had the air of one who grimly jests.

"Excellent! A wife who actually foresees her husband's wishes, and acts accordingly! Yes, I suppose it is best that it should be so. Pray continue to enliven my meals with your pretty prattle."

The colour sprang to her face at the gibe. "Perhaps you will give me more efficient support next time," she said quickly, speaking before reflecting.

He laughed as though he had scored a point. "I think I warned you against answering back," he softly reminded her.

She looked him full in the eyes — a look which apparently infuriated him. With a sudden forward movement he caught her by the waist, dragging her down upon his knee. "Here, drink to our good health and future happiness!" he cried, pushing the glass of wine towards her.

The unlooked-for assault made her so faint that she knew the wine would do her good, help her to maintain her self-command in this ghastly situation. She sat where he placed her, took the glass from his hand with both hers, and lifted it to her lips. "I drink to your good health," she said with dignity.

He gave a wrathful exclamation, snatched the glass from her, so that the remainder of the wine was shot over the carpet, and said: "Little hypocrite! You would sooner drink to my death!"

"Oh, no," said she, "I desire your health. You are a very sick man just now, in mind if not in body."

"Sick or well, I am your husband — in sickness or in health, you know."

She answered patiently. "Yes; I know. I am not likely to forget."

She took out a tiny handkerchief, wiping her trembling lips with it. The action drew his attention to the tourmalin ring she wore above her wedding-ring. He snatched at her hand, pulled off the ring, and flung it into the heart of the fire which glowed dully afar off in the old-fashioned steel grate, for the day had not been warm.

"An end of that," he said. "I only used it to get it out of your mother's hands."

She drew in her breath in a long sigh, but made no other demonstration, though she felt her head swim. He was holding her with both hands, and his touch seemed as

if it seared. He looked as if he longed to provoke some sign of acute feeling.

"You are proud," he said, under his breath. "Proud as Lucifer. But I'll tame your pride."

There seemed no answer to this, and she attempted none.

"You are going to be the passive martyr, the persecuted victim, are you?" he went on. "That is the rôle you select? But don't try me too far, or you may provoke me to *make* you show yourself in your true colours."

She raised her hands to her mouth with a little moan. "Oh!" she faltered, shaken with the storm of her wounded heart. "Isn't it enough for you to know me broken? Must you see the tears and hear the cries before you can be satisfied? Well, you will — very soon. I — don't feel as if I can bear much more. But to-night you have hit too hard. You have blunted all feeling. I *could* not care, whatever happened. I have got past that."

With a sudden gasping for breath, she made an effort to rise. For a moment he seemed minded to constrain her, but almost immediately let her go. She stood, supporting herself a moment against the corner of the table, then tried a few uncertain steps, and collapsed softly in a little forlorn heap of silk and gauze upon the carpet, midway to the door.

Gaunt rose, his face dark with annoyance. This was altogether so unlike his own forecasts of the scene that he was bewildered. He had expected coaxings, blandishments, the pleadings and wiles with which Virginia the elder had made him so intimately acquainted. He remembered how, when in the old days his sullen temper had made him harsh, she had hung about him, how sweetly and pathetically she had put him in the wrong, how deftly she had smoothed his ruffled fur and achieved her own ends whatever they were.

Continually in his solitude, brooding over the wreck of

his life, he had told himself that now he knew, now he was wise with the wisdom we garner from the fields of tragedy and disappointment. He was proof against the sirens, his ears were plugged with wool. Was he not the man to punish and reform a coquette?

He went and stood over Virginia; then knelt at her side, passed an arm under her, and arranged her in a more easy posture. She was in a dead faint. He stared doubtfully, rose, haltingly crossed the room, and laid his fingers upon the bell. He did not ring it. His hand fell away; he went to the table, poured some water into a glass, knelt and dabbed her temples. She did not move.

After a minute or two he rose, went softly to the door and peered out into the hall. There was no sound of Hemming or the coffee. Turning back he stooped, lifted Virgie with ease, carried her into the drawing-room, laid her on a sofa near the window, and opened the casement wide upon the night. The fresh, strong air revived her. She opened her eyes, and looking upward, saw the canopy of stars in the deep-blue velvet heavens.

Slowly coming back to the realisation of the present moment, she turned her head, and saw Gaunt stooping over the hearth, placing a fresh log upon the fire. She sat up, sick and shivering. He looked round quickly at her movement, but turned away again and did not speak. He stood gazing down at the leaping flames in brooding silence; then, facing about with one of his sudden, flinging movements, which sent her heart into her mouth, he marched across the room, opened the grand piano and sat down.

Virginia was conscious of great astonishment as he began to play. It was wild, Hungarian music, leaping and striking like lightning flashes. But it seemed the one thing she could have borne at the moment. With a sigh of utter fatigue, she let her head droop against the hard, uncompromising cushion of the old-fashioned sofa and

listened. He had been playing about ten minutes, when Hemming and the coffee came in; and Virginia was able to sit up and help herself with composure.

"Hemming," said Gaunt, as the servant was leaving the room, "Mrs. Gaunt is overtired. Tell Grover she will be coming upstairs almost at once."

"Yes, sir."

The man departed, and again the closing of the door awoke those faint, mysterious reverberations which were like the last contact of the outside world with the tragedy of the isolated and rock-chained maiden. So might Andromeda have felt, when the smith had hammered into place the last rivet of her fetters, and she was left — left helpless and in an anguish of suspense, to await the oncoming of the monster.

Gaunt drank his coffee seated upon the piano-stool. Then he set down his cup and began once more to play. This time it was soft and gentle, a lullaby, like falling water. It brought the tears rushing to Virginia's eyes, so that she hid her face against the cushions, and covered her mouth to suppress her crying.

Oh for just one moment of the clinging of Pansy's arms; of the bear's hug from a leaping boy in pyjamas, declining to go to bed tractably, wasting his sister's time in the fashion in which she loved to have it wasted! What were they all doing now, at this hour? Caroline, the new maid, was just bringing up Pansy's cup of Benger's food. Was it properly made? —"thin, but not too thin," like Mr. Woodhouse's gruel? Virgie had taken pains to show Caroline exactly how to do it. She had seemed to understand.

Were they missing their sister? Would Pansy — intolerable thought — cry for Virgie's good-night kiss and tuck-in? Oh, no, surely not! They would all be lapped in their new comfort and security. They would be better

cared for than she, with all her goodwill, had been able to accomplish, unsupported by funds.

Yet, oh, to be back, with that burden hanging over her as of old! To take up and shoulder the weight that had been crushing her, even if to do so meant death — a maiden death, a blessed release from this hard, difficult world.

She grasped, she clutched at the only consolation she had. Her present agony of terror and apprehension was just the price she had to pay for their safety and welfare. She had determined to pay it, and she would carry out her resolve. She must not flinch because it was turning out so much worse than she had thought possible. What did it matter — what *could* it matter, what became of her? They were happy and secure; Gaunt was tightly bound down to go on helping them, even in the case of her own death. She felt so weak, so scared that night, that she thought for the first time in all her life of death as a thing which might conceivably happen to herself.

"What is the use of minding," she whispered, trying to reassure herself. "It doesn't matter — nobody but me will ever know."

Her sobbing ceased. Something in the music helped to soothe it. The flutter of harmonious notes was like the beating of wings. It suggested the flight of wild birds. She thought of the swans which used to cross the sky in autumn at Lissendean, flying to seek new spheres for themselves. There came to her mind that story of Hans Andersen, in which the princess has to weave coats of nettles for the princes, her brothers, in order to break the spell that binds them. Should she not gladly plait her nettle-coats, endure her doom, to lift from those two beloved heads the evil spell of poverty and sickness?

. . . . . .

The music stopped.

With it, her thoughts ceased as if shivered suddenly to fragments.

Her husband rose from the piano. Her heart was in her mouth, and she found herself shuddering in a panic terror which drove out every other sensation. He came up and stood looking at her, with a somewhat resentful expression.

"You seem quite done up," he observed. "You had better go to bed and to sleep. A good night's rest is what you want. To-morrow let us hope you will be more fit to take up your new duties."

She raised her wet eyes with a glance of incredulous gratitude. "I am sorry I gave way," she murmured. "I am not usually so weak. But you see, a great deal has happened . . . and I hardly slept at all last night, and I *am* very tired." Slowly she stood up, eagerly but silently questioning him.

After a moment's embarrassment she held out her hand. He drew his own from his pocket to present in return. Half contemptuously, he threw a glance at the little girlish fingers lying in his square brown palm. "I'll give you another ring," he said brusquely, "but I couldn't stand seeing you wear that other. When we meet to-morrow morning, I hope you will be rested. Good night. Off with you."

She needed no second bidding.

CHAPTER XI

A FIRST EXPERIENCE

"Living alone in an empty house
Here half hid in the gleaming wood, . . .
Till a morbid hate and horror have grown
Of a world in which I have hardly mixt,
And a morbid, eating lichen fixt
On a heart half turned to stone."— TENNYSON.

It seemed to Virginia, as she let her limbs relax in the big, downy old bed, as though she never could sleep again. Somewhere in that silent house couched the Monster, as yet inert, but one day to awake, one day to rise before her as she cowered there chained to her rock. The very silence seemed full of breathings, the whispering of the trees outside her window was like a stealthy approach. How could sleep visit her? Yet youth exhausted will have its way, and she had not been laid to rest more than half an hour when she was in a profound and tranquil slumber, which lasted without a break until she was called next morning.

Grover had drawn back the curtains, and her room was full of sunshine. The maid brought her tea to the bedside, and smiled as though she could not help smiling at the angelic little face in its tumbled golden halo.

"Dear me, ma'am, if you'll pardon the liberty, it does seem that odd to have a lady in this house," said she benevolently.

"Why? Does Mr. Gaunt not have many visitors?" asked Virgie drowsily.

"Oh, never ladies, ma'am! Why, ever since I came, no

lady has stayed in this house — no, nor so much as dined! What is it they call the master in these parts — it means one that hates women?"

"Misogynist?" said Virgie. "Have I married a misogynist?"

"Indeed, ma'am; it's high time he was cured. A fine man like him, strong and in the prime of life. We've all wished it, many a time! And cured he could not help but be, once he had seen you, as we all agreed last night," was the flattering verdict, given rather timidly.

The bride coloured, but did not seem offended. She raised herself on her elbow and ate her morsel of toast, asking Grover various questions.

"Our courtship has been so short, I know nothing about his home life," she said. "But this seems to be a very pretty place."

"Pretty indeed, and a different house it will be when once you get it going, and full of friends, ma'am. Of course, they all say he was disappointed in love as a young man, ma'am, and that is why he dislikes the poor ladies so much. I expect, however, you know a good bit more about that than what I do."

"Yes," said Virgie, "I know all about that." She sighed. "I hope I shall do right," she remarked, "but gentlemen who live alone grow very set in their ways. You must tell me of any little tastes or fancies he may have."

Grover laughed gaily as she gathered up the tea-things and went to fill the bath. "You that can turn him round your little finger, I'll be bound," she chuckled.

The new mistress left her in this pleasing delusion, and lay back upon her pillows with a sigh. If she could but have the whole day in bed, she thought wistfully. A long day's rest, after her good sleep, would set her up once more. At this moment her one desire was to snuggle down in the

safe refuge of the bedclothes, and remain there utterly passive and inert.

She appeared, however, punctually in the dining-room when the gong for breakfast sounded.

The meal was set in the old-fashioned way, the tea and coffee service before the mistress, the hot dishes at the other end.

Gaunt was standing with an open newspaper in his hand near the window.

"Well," he said, "did you sleep?"

"Yes, thank you, I did."

She came up and shook hands. He eyed her keenly. This was the first time he had seen her in morning dress. Her white linen was simple and fresh, and she was daintily neat; but there were blue shadows under the melting eyes, and a sad droop of the mouth which spoke of dejection.

"Come, sit down, and pour out my coffee," he said, limping quickly to his own place. "We have much to get through to-day. You must go and see Mrs. Wells, and give the orders for the day." He added, with his "bad smile": "If you are not very good at housekeeping, I don't envy you. She will think very small beer of you."

"It is two years since I had the management of a large house," was the gentle reply, "but I do not think I have forgotten. London housekeeping would seem more difficult to me."

He looked at her, puzzled. "But your mother kept house at Lissendean, I presume?"

"N-no, I don't think mother ever kept house," said Virgie doubtfully. "She used to have a first-rate housekeeper who managed everything when we were little. But afterwards, when I grew up, we were becoming so much poorer, that I told father to dismiss the housekeeper and save her wages, because I thought I could manage. It

was wonderful," she added reminiscently, "how much we saved then."

"Perhaps your father was not as particular about his food as I am," he remarked sourly.

"I expect Mrs. Wells knows your likes and dislikes, does she not? If she will help me for the first few weeks, I think I can manage to please you," was the courteous rejoinder.

Gaunt laid down his knife and fork to contemplate her. "In some ways," he said slowly, "it appears that you do *not* resemble your mother."

"Who? I? Oh, no, I am not a bit like mother, except in looks," calmly replied Virgie. "Did you suppose I was? She is social and I am domestic. She likes going out, and I like home. I am shy with strangers, and she never is." After a minute's thought, she added: "You see, ever since I grew up, I have known the seamy side of things — trouble, losing father, and poverty. I suppose it has made me dull."

The man glowered upon her fixedly as she sat, with an empty plate, sipping her cup of tea.

"You're not eating," he threw out, at length.

"I have not much appetite this morning," was her gentle reply.

"Eat!" he shouted, springing from his place and noting with satisfaction her involuntary recoil. "Come, what's it to be? Kidney and mushroom, eggs, ham — what?"

She grew pink with distress. "Please, no," she pleaded. "I — I can't manage it. I — I simply can't swallow."

"Nonsense!" he declared loudly. "No airs and graces here, please. What will you have?" He held his fork poised above the dishes. There was an electric silence, and he thought she was going to rebel openly. But, after a brief struggle, she commanded herself.

"An egg, please."

He rose, brought her the egg and the toast rack. She thanked him carefully, and he seemed to retire behind his paper. But, after some silence, he abruptly flung it down.

"If you don't eat what you have there, I'll come and stand over you," he threatened.

He was obeyed then, though with a most evident effort.

"As soon as you have had your interview with Mrs. Wells," said he, when she had finished, "I want to take you round the farms. Be ready in the hall at ten-thirty sharp."

She rose. "Perhaps you will either show me the way to the kitchens, or ring for one of the servants?" said she rather stiffly.

"Hoity toity!" cried her husband, stopping short to gaze upon her. "We stand upon our dignity, don't we? Come along. I'll show you."

She followed him down the tiled passage, to the comfortable, though not very extensive kitchen premises. Omberleigh was not a large house, though the reception rooms were spacious and dignified.

"Now, Mrs. Wells," he announced, "here's your new tyrant. She fancies herself on her housekeeping, so I expect there will be wigs on the green before very long. But remember, if you quarrel you part; I am not going to have any wranglings in my peaceful bachelor abode."

Mrs. Wells evidently looked upon this speech as a particularly choice specimen of humour. "Well, there now! I never!" was her good-humoured comment. "If I can't make friends with this young lady, sir, I think I shall deserve to be turned out, if I have served you for a goodish while. He thinks to tease you and me, ma'am, don't he?"

The new mistress had a deft smile all ready. "Indeed, Mrs. Wells, I think he is fond of teasing," she said; and, as so often, the cadence of her voice reminded him unbear-

ably of the woman who had forsaken him, hardened his heart, and drove him away, hostile and irritated.

Mrs. Wells proceeded to make Virginia welcome. Grover had evidently carried down a good report of the new arrival. The housekeeper took her lady round dairy, scullery, store-room and larder, and was soon impressed with her thorough knowledge of the workings of a gentleman's country household.

"Bless me, to look at her you'd never think it!" she declared afterwards. "Just like one of the coloured plates in the fashion papers, or a wax doll with the paper just off of it. But what she don't know about churning ain't worth learning; and as to bread and cakes — why, you'd think she had kept house all her life, and it's my belief she has too — ever since she was old enough to have the sense for it."

. . . . . .

At half-past ten, when Gaunt strolled into the hall, his wife, in a shady hat and with a white sunshade, was descending the stairs. Her unquestioning submission — the punctuality which left him no ground for any kind of complaint — was annoying. He felt that the ground was being fairly cut away under his feet, and decided that he must make it clear that a mere policy of yielding would not exempt her from the discipline he meant to inflict.

They left the house together and, turning to the left among the thick pines, soon found a gate which let them through into the sunny meadowland.

They first visited the stables, the barnyards, and the orchards. Then descending the slope, they came to the cattle in the pastures. Beyond this again was cornland, and the fields were beginning to grow faintly golden with the promise of harvest.

Mindful of his sneer at her "prattle" Virginia said little; but he could not but recognise, from what she did

say, that she knew what she was talking about. She asked one or two questions about his manures, which touched upon the very point that just now interested him keenly. He was almost as much surprised as if she had begun to speak to him in Arabic. More clearly than ever he was beginning to perceive that this was not by any means the woman he had expected. Yet he hardened his heart. He gazed upon her elegance, her fragility, her Dresden china fairness, and told himself she was merely cleverer than he had foreseen. The agricultural interest was just a pose, meant to conciliate him. She had, apparently, more than one weapon up her sleeve. She intended his conquest, and was planning her campaign accordingly. As for him, he felt as a man may who has been taught only English methods of self-defence when confronted for the first time with a professor of Jiu-jitsu.

He had planned for himself the gratification of breaking in to a life of country solitude a second Virginia Sheringham. He had thought that he knew and understood the methods which would be most effective. He had his victim in his power, but behold! It was not merely not Virginia Sheringham, it was nobody in the least like her. More than once already he had been visited by the notion that he was behaving like a brute, that he was bullying a defenceless thing. Such a thought was intolerable. It simply could not be true. If it were, what outcome to the situation was there? No. It was not true. This submissiveness, this helpless passivity, was merely the policy of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. She had some desperate plan in her head — meant, perhaps, to escape? He must be ready.

Meanwhile, they had tramped for nearly two hours, and Virginia's powers were giving out. The day was a fine one, and it was the hottest hour. When they reached a stile, overshadowed by the grateful coolness of a huge beech

tree in the corner of a lately mown field, she sat down and begged for a few minutes' rest.

"What, done up again? You don't seem to be very strong. We are two miles from home, and if we wait about we shall be late for lunch. Come along now, you can rest when we get back."

"I don't want any lunch," she answered faintly, "but I must rest. Please go on and have lunch yourself, and leave me here awhile in the shade."

"Ha!" he said, delighted at this confirmation of his thoughts. "No, young woman, I think it safer to keep my eye on you."

She made no reply in words. Her eyes were closed, and two tears forced their way beneath the lids and slipped down her cheeks.

He made an exclamation of vexation. "Not good for much, are you?" he grunted. "Comes of eating no breakfast. What am I going to do with you now, I wonder? Why didn't you call a halt before you were completely done for?"

"I didn't think we should go so far," she answered listlessly. She was beyond caring how he felt. She only knew that she could not get up and go on.

The sound of trotting hoofs approaching along the lane beyond the stile was heard. A dog-cart, driven by a pleasant-looking young man, came in sight.

"Good luck!" muttered Gaunt. He raised his voice. "Hallo, Caunter! My wife has been making the rounds with me, and is a bit done up by the heat. Will you get down, and let me drive her home?"

"Why, certainly," said a good-humoured voice, "only too much honoured. May I beg to be presented to Mrs. Gaunt?"

"Virginia, this is Caunter, my bailiff," said Gaunt, concealing his unwillingness as best he could.

Virginia sat up, opened her eyes and summoned a smile. Young Caunter had descended from the trap, and stood by the stile. As his eyes fell upon the bride, they widened with very spontaneous surprise and admiration.

"I say, this is luck to meet you, to be the first to wish you joy, Mrs. Gaunt," he said boyishly. "My chief is hugely to be congratulated."

"Oh," said the pale bride, "it is kind of you to say that! But you ought to say he is to be pitied, when I behave in this weak way! I am usually quite a good walker."

Caunter fixed his eyes intently upon the quickly changing colour, and marked the faltering voice. "I've got my flask in my pocket," he said hesitatingly to Gaunt, who nodded and held out his hand.

"A thimbleful of brandy will be the best thing for you," said he, bending over his wife with the cup. "Drink that!"

As usual, she obeyed without dispute. Her colour came back by degrees as the two men exchanged a few sentences about the land.

"Do you feel well enough now to let me drive you back?" asked Gaunt presently.

"Oh, yes, of course. Thank you very much, Mr. Caunter." She held out the cup to its owner as she spoke the words, lifting her appealing chin, and giving him a smile such as he had thought existed only in romances.

The husband marked the emotions which expressed themselves in his bailiff's honest countenance. He noticed also the simplicity and unconsciousness of his wife's expression. Nothing he could take hold of.

He crossed the stile, helped her over, put her into the cart, got in himself and gathered up the reins.

"Better get up behind, Hugh," said he.

Caunter reddened slightly and hung back. These two were married only yesterday.

"Yes, you had better. I don't want to have to stable your mare till you come for her," bade his master.

He yielded and jumped up.

With a tact which spoke well for him, he said a few words to Gaunt as they drove, until the quick motion through the air revived Virginia completely, and she began to ask one or two eager questions about the neighbourhood. He found himself speaking of the beauties of Dovedale, of the weird limestone caverns of the Peak, and of the Druid circle at Arbor Low. She was interested. To Caunter it seemed but a minute before they stood at the drive gate of Omberleigh. His head was whirling. He jumped down to open the gate, and said:

"If you don't mind, I will leave you to take Mrs. Gaunt to the door. I want to speak to Emerson."

He opened the gate, and was about to disappear into the lodge, which was occupied by the head gardener, when Gaunt called him back for some message with regard to cucumbers. As he was speaking, bending down over the side of the cart, the sound of horse's feet upon the road became audible, and a rider hove in sight, who drew rein promptly and shouted a greeting.

He was a somewhat showy young man, with a chestnut moustache and eyes set too close together. He rode a fine beast, and was got up in leggings and cord breeches.

"Why, hang me if it isn't true!" he cried hilariously. "They told me you had been taken prisoner, Gaunt, and I refused to believe it. Bet Charlie Myers two to one against, down at the Market Hall yesterday. But"—raising his hat, and riding up close to Virginia—"when one sees the lady, the whole thing becomes clear. Poor old chap! you never had a chance. Present me, won't you?"

"This is Mr. Ferris, whose land is not far from here," said Gaunt. "My wife, Ferris."

"But this is simply grand," declared Ferris. "My wife will be ready to eat you, Mrs. Gaunt. Never, since your husband came to these parts, has she been allowed inside his doors. I say, Gaunt, you'll have to keep your door on the chain nowadays to bar out the women, you will, by Jove! They'll simply roll up. When may Joey come and pay her respects? Give her the start, won't you?"

To Virginia's surprise, Gaunt's manners were equal to an occasion which she could see was very disagreeable to him.

"Mrs. Ferris must give us time," he said simply. "My wife has to go over the house and make some changes before she will feel ready to receive guests. At present we are on our honeymoon, and must not be disturbed. Sure you'll understand."

"Right-O!" replied Mr. Ferris. "But don't bar us out too long, or we may get restive and break in. Welcome to the county, Mrs. Gaunt! You're going to make things hum hereabouts, I can see."

Gaunt, his lips set in a tight, thin line, turned the cart into the drive, waved a hand to his neighbour and drove off. "Damn!" he ejaculated under his breath, as the mare quickened her pace. "If I hadn't had to bring you back by the road, we shouldn't have met that jackass!"

"I'm sorry," said Virginia gravely.

CHAPTER XII

THE BEGINNING OF DEFEAT

"Oh, heart of stone, are you flesh, and caught
By that which you swore to withstand?"— TENNYSON.

"My word, but she's a peach," muttered Mr. Percy Ferris to himself as he rode hastily home through the lanes to lunch. "And old Gaunt's got her! That smoke-dried old curmudgeon! Well, some people have the devil's own luck. Poor little woman. Sold to him, I suppose? Sold, body and soul. And he sits looking as though he would like to shut her up in a harem where no other man but himself could ever set eyes on her. Oh, why wasn't she about in my day? However, one can't have everything, I suppose."

It was as well that he should admit this, for he was considered extremely lucky by most of his neighbours. Beginning life as a veterinary surgeon, he had happened to be about when the late Colonel Coxon departed this life, leaving Josephine, his only daughter, sole heiress of Perley Hatch, a nice little property.

Joey was only nineteen at the time, and was what the Americans, with delicate euphemism, call homely. She had projecting teeth, a freckled skin, little twinkling eyes, and a loud voice. In person she was large and ungainly; but she had her points. A bouncing good humour, a fine seat on horseback, and a real love of children and animals made her more or less popular in the district. Ferris was not a good husband, but he was not actively unkind to her,

though he spared no chance of letting her know that, but for her money, he would never have looked her way.

As he entered his home, and passed through the untidy hall, littered with whips, sticks, children's toys, golf clubs and tennis bats, mingled in wild disorder with coats, jerseys, old hats, gardening gloves and aprons, a loud roaring could be heard, and Joey presently came downstairs, her firstborn son, an ugly fat child of about five, tucked under her arm, kicking, fighting, and bellowing.

"Hallo!" said she, perceiving her husband. "I've been giving Tom a good spanking to teach him not to torture things. I can't think what makes 'em such little demons of cruelty. Bill's just as bad. I won't have it, that's flat. You hear, Tom? If ever you hurt anything you're going to get hurt yourself. Comprenny, my son?"

She set Tom on his feet, dusted him down, pushed her untidy hair out of her eyes with one hand, and patted the boy with the other.

"Kiss and make friends," said she. "Here's daddy, and we're going to have dinner."

Tom bore no malice. He gave and received the kiss of amity, and they went into the dining-room, where a huge dish of boiled beef, flanked with carrots, turnips, and suet dumplings steamed upon the board.

A nurse brought down Bill, and seated him on his high chair. Then Ferris, having begun to carve with celerity, could keep his news no longer to himself.

"Jo," he said, "it's true — true, after all."

"Eh, what?" said Joey, busy preparing Bill's dinner in a plate with a special high edge.

"I wouldn't believe it — actually betted against it," continued her husband, chuckling, "but it's gospel truth. Old Gaunt's gone and got married."

"Go on! Pulling my leg!" observed Joey, with equal elegance and good humour.

"My girl, I've seen 'em — actually seen 'em together. Came up just as he was at his drive gate — telling Caunter something. She was sitting in the trap beside him, and — Jee-rusalem, she's a peach, if you like!"

"Percy, you are the limit. Remember the boys."

"Lucky little beggars, they aren't old enough to suffer like their daddy. I tell you I've never seen anything quite like her. She looks as if a breath would blow her away — like what the serials call a vision from another world. And old Gaunt sitting there beside her, looking as if he would like to lay forcible hands on my windpipe. Old Gaunt. Help!"

"Well, I never," said Joey, deeply impressed. "It may be a bit of all right for us, if she's a decent sort. Nearest neighbours, aren't we?"

"My dear, there's nothing else within miles of her. I believe the Chase is next nearest. By the bye, think I'll ride over there this afternoon and tell her ladyship the news. Come with me, old girl?"

"I believe I will," said Joey. "Let's see, what's the first day it will be decent to call at Omberleigh?"

"Not till further orders," laughed her husband. "Mrs. G. will send out cards when she is ready to receive. Poor little soul. I thought she looked as if she hoped somebody would throw her a rope before long. Old Gaunt. My hat!"

"You call him old," observed Joey after a pause, during which she took out her handkerchief and thoughtfully scrubbed Tom's nose, "but he's only five or six years older than you."

"And looks twenty years older."

"That's only because he doesn't care what he looks like. Perhaps she'll furbish him up."

"Just fancy," burst out her husband. "That sweet little creature up there in his clutches. It makes one

shudder. I wonder if he talks to her about manure? What should you suppose he *does* talk about, eh?"

"You can search me," responded Mrs. Ferris tranquilly. She never spoke English where slang could conveniently be substituted. "It's one of these money transactions — like ours," she presently remarked. "She gets Gaunt and you got me. You are both of you adventurers."

"They were saying, down at the market Hall, that she was a daughter of Bernard Mynors, of Lissendean, somewhere in Dorsetshire. Didn't your father know something of the family?"

"He knew a General Mynors. Yes, he had a brother named Bernard, and their place was in Dorset. Came out of the top drawer, she did, if she's one of that lot. But stony, you know — simply stony. I wonder where he picked her up?"

"You can search me," retorted Percy at once, and they both giggled. "All I can tell you about her is that she is It."

. . . . . .

The bride appeared at lunch, pale but valiant. Gaunt was standing in the hall as she descended the stairs, and noticed that she leaned her hand upon the rail, and moved as if she were stiff. He decided that there was no doubt that this was a mere piece of humbug. She wished to impress him with an idea of helplessness, under cover of which she was forming some plan of campaign.

She forced herself to eat a little, because he was watching her under his lowered lids. When she had done, and Hemming had left the room, he rose, came to her end of the table, produced from his pocket a handful of gem rings, and tossed them on the table-cloth. "Choose what you like," he said carelessly.

The colour sprang hot to her face. With a dignified gesture she pushed away the jewels and rose to her feet.

"After what you said yesterday, you cannot expect me to take presents from you," said she, making as if to pass from the room.

"Ha!" he stood before her, the light of combat in his eyes. "You decline tc take presents from me — good! But you can't decline to do as I order you. I order you to wear two of those rings, one on your left hand and the other on your right. Choose quickly, or I will put them on your finger myself."

She stood, and he could see how hard she found it to fight back words. In fact, she could not but realise that it would be madness to arouse the resentment of the extraordinary being whose motives she was quite unable to fathom; yet she made one effort to brave him.

"I will not choose — I have no choice," said she, not glancing at the rings, but with her eyes on his face.

He turned, scooped up the rings in one hand, laid the other on her arm just above the elbow, and said:

"Come, I will help you to make a selection. There is a little room at the west corner of the house which I think you may like to consider yours. Let me show you."

She went with him unprotesting, and tried to control the shuddering which his grip upon her arm caused her to experience.

The room which they entered was evidently his own study. It was full of books and papers, untidy and dingy looking, like the haunts of most men where the housemaid is forbidden. Through this he passed by an inner door to a smaller room, with two windows — one south, one west.

It was scantily furnished, but might have been pretty if artistically arranged. She glanced round. There *was* a second door. A room which she could neither enter nor leave without passing through his would be a poor boon. He pushed her down upon a sofa, seated himself beside

her, and laid the little pile of rings upon her knee. Without speaking, he took her left hand in his own, and began fitting the rings one after another. All were too large, except a fine half-hoop of emeralds.

"That for the present," said he, "and we can have some others altered. Which do you like next best?"

"I do not like to wear any of them," she answered faintly. His shoulder was touching her own, and her terror grew with each moment.

"You are obstinate," he said, with a scowl.

She shook her head. "It is not a question of what I like, so why pretend that it is? I will do anything that you say I must," she murmured, so low that he could hardly hear.

"Well, then, I say you must choose another ring." She turned them over listlessly. "This," said she at last, taking a single diamond.

"Good!" He gathered up the rest. Then, to her utter relief, he rose. "I will make it into a packet for the post," said he.

"Oh! That reminds me!" She was suddenly eager. "Please tell me, have you a second post here?"

"Yes. It will be in soon — about an hour's time."

"Oh, I am glad!" A glow irradiated her wistful face. "Pansy promised to write; I thought she could not have forgotten." There was a break in her voice as she mentioned her little sister. "When does the post go out?" she went on.

"Very inconveniently, the man who brings the bag also takes it back, so that if you are going to write, you must have your letter ready before you receive the one you expect. Will you like to write it now? You will find things on the table."

He turned, went back into his own room, and closed the communicating door.

Left alone, her first act was to steal across the floor to the other exit, and turn the handle. It was locked, and the key had been taken out.

The knowledge that she was actually a prisoner came to her with a shock of horror. What would happen to her, what was she to expect in this house of mysterious terror? She dare not give way, however. No matter what she suffered, Pansy must know nothing of it — Tony must know nothing. She must write a letter which should reassure them; and, if once she yielded to the creeping, nameless horror which assailed her, this would be impossible.

Rallying her courage, she fought the sobs which rose in her throat, and sat down to the writing-table.

She had just sealed and stamped her letter, and was wondering whether she dare lie down upon the sofa and rest, when Gaunt came in, his letters for the post and the packet for the jeweller in his hand. He went up to the place she had just vacated, laid down what he carried, and took up the letter which she had left lying on the blotter.

"Shouldn't have sealed it until I had read it," he remarked coolly, as he broke the envelope open.

Virginia sprang to her feet, and her angry cry of "Oh, how *can* you?" convinced him that he was on the right track at last. He was going to hear the truth, as she had written it to those with whom she knew no reserve. "One of my rules," said he, "is to read all the letters you write."

"You ——" Half in shame, half in rage she broke off, she stifled the word upon her tongue. Drawing back, mistress of herself, she remarked scornfully: "I might have thought. People who break vows will not respect seals."

His back was towards her, so she could not see whether that stung. It certainly did not avail to change his intention. He read her letter deliberately through.

My Own Precious Little Sister,

You will be so anxious to know how I am, and what my new home is like, that although I am very tired, I must send you a scribble before the post goes out, which is much earlier than I thought.

Well, my darling, we got here quite safely. This house stands on a hill, and there are woods behind it. The garden goes right down the hill. It is not as big as Lissendean, but it is a very nice house, and there are kind servants.

You would have laughed if you had seen Osbert and me, sitting each at one end of a great long table, having dinner in state.

It seemed so odd this morning to be called — to have tea brought to me instead of taking it to mamma — to have no bed to make, nor breakfast things to wash up. Nothing to do, in fact, except order the dinner. The housekeeper, Mrs. Wells, is very nice. I think we shall be great friends. Her dairy is beautiful; they have those churns that darling father and I used to long for at Lissendean. I almost cried, remembering.

This morning was gloriously fine. Osbert took me out over the farms, and showed me the horses and the cornland and all the estate. I was very silly and got faint when we had gone some way. You see, I don't like to confess to him how run down I have been; and having had so little food for so long, I have no appetite, and the very sight of the abundant meals makes me feel ill. I simply can't swallow. I know this good air will make me better by degrees.

Oh, darling, I felt so homesick — so deadly homesick last night. I thought of you all, and wondered what you were doing, how you were getting on, and whether you missed Virgie. Also I remembered that I never showed Caroline the place where your surgical things are kept. You must show her before the great doctor comes. Oh,

how anxious I shall be until I hear all about his visit. Keep up your heart, darling. I know you will be much better before long.

Osbert has given me a little sitting-room for my own. I am writing there now. He has given me a splendid emerald ring, and another with a diamond in it.

Oh, Pansy, love, darling, pet, write and tell me everything — just everything you can think of, because I am very lonely.

Your own most loving

VIRGIE.

P.S.— Hugs and kisses to my old Tony. I hope the bat is satisfactory.

While this letter was being read, there was complete stillness in the room. The writer stood in the window, her back turned to Gaunt. He, when he had finished reading, let the hand which held the paper drop between his knees, while he sat staring upon the motionless figure of his wife. He could not doubt that the letter was spontaneous. She had evidently no idea at all of his demanding to see it. But, if it were true, then what was he? Had he made the greatest mistake of his life?

"What induced you," he demanded huskily, "to write such a letter as this?"

She turned round, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"If you had written as you felt about me and my treatment of you ——"

"But I cannot do that. I am bound to be loyal to you," she said quietly. "You know it. Besides, I may suffer, and perhaps I deserve it. They never shall, if I can help it."

"But they shall, and can," he snarled. "This child will suffer if she never sees you again — and she never shall. No, by ——"

He checked the oath. What was he saying? What was he thinking? There stood before him a dauntless creature, submissive but utterly unconquered. Was he going to find his pleasure in torturing her? . . . His head swam. Yet the perverse devil in him drove him on. "That's part of my plan," he said, "part of my scheme to pay your mother in full. You will never set eyes on any of them again. I told you yesterday — it is a life-sentence."

She answered gravely: "Yes, you told me that."

"And you — you write like this, because you think it would make the child unhappy if she knew the truth. How long do you think you can manage to keep up this farce, eh?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I can't look forward," she muttered hurryingly. "I must just do what I can — as long as I can."

He tossed the letter upon the table. "Seal it down and put it in the bag, for the lie it is," he said thickly.

She sat down obediently to re-seal the envelope. He stood watching her, with eyes full of baffled purpose. Upon them there entered Hemming, bearing a locked post-bag in his hand.

Gaunt unlocked it with a key which was fastened to his watch-chain, took out the contents, placed his own correspondence and his wife's one letter within, relocked the bag, and handed it to the man, who retired.

The letters lay behind him in a little pile. He sorted them, and selected one in a childish, unformed hand, addressed to Mrs. Gaunt.

"Of course," he said, "I also read all the letters you receive."

"I suppose so," replied Virginia dryly.

She felt that her limbs would no longer support her, and sat down white and shaking, clenching her hands together while again silence fell and Gaunt read:

Virgie, my own darling, I must use up the time while you are being married, in writing to say O my sweet dear I hope God will let you be hapy like you deserve to be. I am so sorry I did not see Osbert when he came hear, but you must send me his foto, then I shall know what he is like. O, it is nise to think you will alwas have enuf to eat now. You used to think I did not notice when you gave it all to Tony and me, but I did. I knew too that morning when you fainted over scrubing the kitchen floor, when you came up with that wet stain on your apron I knew because I caled so many times and you did not answer. Now you will be rich and grand and hapy, and you must not think I shall fret, because I don't mean to. Carroline is a nise woman, very kind to me, but O Virgie, I shall not be so hapy with Mamma now you are not hear to keep her pleased, I hope it is not rong to write this. It must be so funny to have a husband, give him my love if you think he would like it, are your nees well yet? Mind you don't walk too far till they are. Have you dissided which room is to be mine when I come to Omberleigh? Do let it look out on the yard so I can see the chickens. Good-bye, darling, DARLING,

YOUR LITTLE PANSY BLOSSOM.

P.S.— Urmintrude is quite well.

There was a pause after the man had finished reading. He frowned, bit his lip, and stared at the floor. At last he flung a question at his wife. "What's wrong with your knees?"

She started and flushed. "They are — they are a little swollen and sore — with housework — kneeling about, you know," she murmured apologetically. "Does Pansy mention it?"

"What housework have you had to do?"

"Only the keep of Laburnum Villa."

"But there was a servant; I saw her."

"Oh, she only came for that afternoon, because I — I didn't want to let you in myself. . . ."

". . . . And you ask me to believe that you — *you* have been a maid-of-all-work for the past two years?"

"Oh, no, I do not ask you to believe it," came the disdainful retort. "I do not mind whether you believe it or not."

He went up to her with one of his unexpected, almost violent movements, snatched the hand which hung at her side, opened it — studied its pink palm. It had been carefully tended, but it bore unmistakable marks of hard usage.

"It seems to me that I have married the wrong woman," he said, letting it fall again. "It was your mother who ought to have been made to suffer."

"Mother has suffered a great deal," murmured Virginia."

He thrust his hands deep in his pockets, walked away, across the room, came back slowly, paused, staring at her.

"Tell me, for God's sake, what made you consent to such a marriage as this?"

She made a backward movement away from him, her eyes blazing, her temper high. "I did *not* consent — I never consented to such a marriage as this!"

She was in act to go out of the room. He put himself in the way. "What then? What did you expect?"

"I will not speak of it to you!"

"You will speak of what I please!" As she made to pass him, he took her by both arms, holding her before him. "You are to tell me what induced you to agree to marry me."

"Why should I tell you when you do not believe what I say?"

"You tell me — I'll believe or not, as I see fit. Out with it!"

She once more checked the hysterical sobs that threatened her.

"You — you had once loved mother," she said slowly. "You knew that she preferred another man. I am like her. You saw me; it brought back to you that bygone love. I supposed that you were attracted."

She paused.

"But what of yourself? Your own feeling in the matter? I want to get at that."

"It was only a question of me," she muttered, "and it was giving myself up for them. I — you see, I could do nothing." In spite of her control sobs began to shake her voice. "It was hopeless; we were at the end ——" She broke off to summon fresh nerve. He stood immovable, holding her, compelling her, as it were, to continue.

"The end of your resources?"

She nodded. "And nearly the end of my strength too. I was afraid that, if I took a place anywhere, my health would give way. I was afraid — a coward!" Suddenly her own emotion gave her words and steadied her voice. "I ought to have gone on — just died, and trusted God to care for them! But, oh, you have never known — never thought of what it means — to have the ones you love, your own, your darlings — destitute, and to know that you — can't go on much longer. . . . As for you"— she looked him squarely in the eyes, her own full of scorn —"how could I have guessed that a man like you could be? A man who could find pleasure in bullying, browbeating the helpless girl he had sworn to love?"

"Ha!" he said, "so you break out at last, do you? How dare you speak to me like that? I shall punish you for it. You haven't read that letter yet. Give it me."

She held Pansy's as yet unread epistle crushed in her

left hand. Without reflecting, she snatched it to her breast, covering it with her other hand. In a whirlwind of some blind fury which he could not analyse he took it from her, using force to unclasp her fingers.

There was a tussle — momentary only — then she stood free of him in the middle of the room, a wild look on her face, glancing this way and that as if for escape. He stood before the one door, the other was locked. Like a flame blown out by a puff of wind her passion died as the knowledge of her own desperate case overflooded her. Turning away with a long-drawn moan she crouched down in a big chair, hiding her face, giving way to her despair unrestrained.

In a minute or two she heard his voice, harsh and broken, speaking close to her. "Why did you provoke me? You shouldn't; it's dangerous," he growled hurriedly. "Here, take your letter; here it is"— pushing it into her hands. "Stop crying, can you? or conceal your face. Here comes Hemming with the tea."

At the admonition she sprang to her feet, and he saw the pathos of her pale, tear-washed cheeks. With a swift movement she ran to the writing-table, seated herself thereat, and bent down her face as if busily occupied. Gaunt placed himself beside her, leaning partly over, as if watching what she wrote; and upon the domestic tableau the servant entered with his tray.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TREATMENT BREAKS DOWN

"Oh, do not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember thou wast one."—DONNE.

THE otter hounds were out, and Mr. Ferris was driving his wife in the car to the meet. The gentleman was in capital humour, for he knew how acceptable a companion he would prove to everybody this morning; being, so far as he knew, the only person who had yet actually beheld the romantic creature who had conquered that hard and woman-hating bachelor, Gaunt of Omberleigh.

"I wonder if she'll hunt?" remarked Joey. "Gaunt's a good horseman in spite of his lameness. Just fancy seeing him about this winter with a pretty wife in tow! It's simply too rippin'— best news I've heard for a long time."

"Hallo! Who's this riding the wrong way?" said her husband suddenly. "If it isn't the doctor. Hallo, Dymock, where are you off to on such a grand morning?" he cried, stopping the engine.

"Give you three guesses," said Dymock, drawing rein with a grin on his clever, keen face. "But you won't guess in fifty."

"Got it in one," shouted Joey. "You're going to Omberleigh, I can see it in your eye."

"You're a wizard, Mrs. Ferris. Have you seen her, then?"

"What, the bride? You don't say you're going to see her?"

"I saw her yesterday," burst in Percy, "and she looked as well as — well, as health itself."

"Old Gaunt is not satisfied, however," replied Dymock. "It's probably nothing much, but he says she seems a bit run down. I suppose I must expect to be sent for if her little finger aches."

"Sure," laughed Ferris. "He looks as if he wishes he could cause her to become invisible when any one of the male sex is passing by. Just the age to make a fool of himself, isn't he? Well, if you're passing our way later, look in, won't you?"

"You'll be wasting your whisky, Ferris. I don't give away my patients."

Ferris grinned. "Welcome, anyway," he said, as he and his wife drove on.

Dr. Dymock pursued his road, his mind as he rode up through the pinewoods being filled with as lively a curiosity as even the couple from Perley Hatch confessed to feeling. What like was the girl — for Ferris said she was a girl, and beautiful at that — who could have married Gaunt?

Hemming showed him into the study. It surprised him vaguely to find the house as untidy and dingy as usual — the abode of a woman-hating bachelor, untouched by the coming of a fair young mistress. Certainly the affair had been very sudden.

Gaunt joined him almost at once, his own appearance just as normal and unchanged as that of his house.

"I must begin with hearty congratulations," observed the doctor, shaking hands cordially. "Ferris, it appears, caught a glimpse of Mrs. Gaunt yesterday, and he says she is perfectly lovely."

"Thanks. Yes, my wife is certainly pretty, but I fear

she is not very strong. As I think I hinted to you in my note, she was bitten with the idea which infects many girls nowadays — this notion of taking up Work, with a capital W. She has been scrubbing floors and cooking meals — laying tables and lighting fires. It has been quite too much for her. She told me nothing of it, and I was inconsiderate enough to take her a long ramble over the estate yesterday. She was so done up afterwards that I persuaded her to stay in bed to-day until you had seen her."

It was frankly and quite pleasantly said. The doctor applauded the new-made husband's care, and was taken upstairs, under Grover's escort, to the room where his patient lay.

He was not a man observant of details, but it struck even him that these were curious surroundings for a modern bride.

Since his inheritance of the property from his great aunt, the survivor of four aged sisters, Gaunt had not thought of touching or altering anything.

The big bedstead on which Virginia lay was what used to be known as a "tester." It had a wooden canopy, and hangings of washed-out chintz.

There was an early Victorian mahogany wardrobe, big, heavy, ugly, and commodious. The rest of the furniture was in keeping. However, plenty of sunshine came in through the long windows, and there was a bunch of roses on a small table near the bed.

With her hair tumbling about her, Mrs. Gaunt looked like a child. He had a moment's horror as he met the nervous, shrinking dread in her lovely eyes. Was this a tragedy?

"I had no idea," stammered the patient, "no idea that my — husband had sent for a doctor. There is no need, I am well, I am only a little tired."

"Just what he told me," said Dymock good-humouredly. "I expect you are both right. You can't wonder at his being a bit anxious, can you?" He glanced up humorously at Grover, who had evidently had strict orders to remain, and who stood primly by the bed. She smiled, however, at his question.

"Indeed, sir, I think the master is quite right. Mrs. Gaunt is thoroughly overdone," said she. "I daresay he told you, sir, as he told us, that she has been going in for this here domestic science work. Young ladies like her, sir, is not fit for it. If you'll believe me, she has been actually washing clothes! That is, she says she had in a woman to help, but it's a sin, sir, for the likes of her. However, now we've put our foot down"—she cast a glance of real kindness at the wistful creature lying there. "There's plenty of us here, sir, to wait on her, hand and foot; and in a few days you'll see she'll be a different thing—a different thing altogether. It is her knees I want you to look at particular, sir, after you've took her pulse, of course."

. . . . . .

When the doctor came downstairs the bridegroom was standing at the hall door, his hands deep thrust in his pockets, gazing out gloomily over the thick and shadowy pinewood.

As Dymock approached, he turned, fixing his eyes upon him. The doctor stood, drawing on his riding gloves, and did not at first speak.

"Well?" said Gaunt at last, with an odd air of exploding.

"Well, I am a little puzzled. No doubt there is debility as a result of overwork, but there is more than that. To tell you the actual truth, your wife has been starving herself. You see, that is a queer, unnatural symptom.

When a healthy girl starves herself, it means one of two things. Either her nerves are all to pieces — she is what we call hysterical — or in the alternative — why, she simply hasn't been able to get enough to eat. Now your wife shows no sign of hysteria that I can see, except for the undoubted fact that she is under-nourished. So ——"

Gaunt folded his arms and looked away. "Dymock," he said unwillingly, "one's doctor keeps one's secrets — eh?"

Dymock raised his clear steady eyes and looked full at him. "I do," was all he said.

"Well, I fear it is true, that she is under-fed and overworked. It has been cruel. I had no idea myself. She looks so, somehow, so unlike that."

"Yes, indeed. You mean that her over-exertion has been necessary?"

"I do."

"Well, I thought as much," replied Dymock, after a pause. "Some unscrupulous employer, I suppose. A good thing you rescued her. She is perfectly healthy and sound, but she won't be anything like robust for some time yet. I am forbidding solid food at present. She must have nourishment every two hours — eggs beaten up in milk, port wine, strong soup, Benger's food — things like that. In a few days her appetite will return. But meanwhile she must be left perfectly quiet, Gaunt — you understand?"

"I understand perfectly. I give you my word for that."

"It won't be for long," said Dymock consolingly. "She is young, and she will pick up fast in this good air; her convalescence will be twice as rapid if you are considerate. She is in a state of acute nervous tension, and must be soothed; kept happy and quiet."

"Perhaps," said Gaunt, after a long pause, "it would

be better if I do not see her at all, just at present. What do you think?"

"It all depends. Does it excite her to see you?"

"It might. Our marriage was sudden, you know. She hardly knows me."

"I think it should depend upon what she would like. Might it not distress her that you should keep away?"

"Perhaps."

"In a few days," went on the doctor, "she ought to go out, if it can be managed without her putting her feet to the ground. You have no motor, have you?"

"No."

"See here, Gaunt — forgive me if this sounds like interference, but the fact of your never having had any ladies to the house — your well-known tastes, or distastes — make things a bit difficult for your wife. She is all alone — there's nobody to come and see her, or cheer her up. I am going to make a bold suggestion. Young Mrs. Ferris is simply bursting with hospitable intentions, and, though she is a bit of a rough diamond, she is one of the best. They have a motor, and she has nothing else to do. Let me send her round in a day or two to call upon Mrs. Gaunt?"

Gaunt's brow lowered. "A woman with a voice like a fog-horn ——"

"No beauty, I grant you, but a real good sort, and your only near neighbour. Let her drive Mrs. Gaunt about, show her the Peak, take her shopping to Buxton, import some light literature from the circulating library — something to pass the time."

"It may be that you are right," replied Gaunt after some hesitation. "I don't want visitors yet, but if Mrs. Ferris would understand that she is quite an exception ——"

"It would double her desire to be of use," laughed the

doctor. "Well, good day. I'll send along a tonic, and I think I should like to see your wife again to-morrow."

"Come as often as you think wise."

The clatter of the hoofs of the doctor's mare died away along the wooded aisles. Gaunt remained standing, his head bent, his hands locked behind his back. He hardly knew what he felt, what dominating impulse would emerge out of the present confusion of a mind which for more than twenty years had been swayed by one sole idea.

The surroundings upon which his moody gaze was fixed were the scene of that accident which had done much to warp his temperament, to give a twist to a disposition which from birth had been passionate and what is known as "difficult." The kind of boy who would have been saved by the devotion of a mother who understood him, he had been left doubly an orphan at an age so early that he had but a confused memory even of his mother's face. His old great-aunts at Omberleigh knew nothing of boys. During his summer vacation he stayed with them and ran wild among the men servants.

He was about fifteen years old, a wilful, even violent-tempered lad, when he disobeyed a direct order by going for a ride upon the bailiff's horse, an uncertain-tempered brute, who could be controlled only by his master. Contrary to his own expectation, all had gone well. He was returning in triumph up the drive, off his guard, exulting in his successful bit of disobedience, when something white rushed across the road. It was a shirt, blown from an adjacent clothes-line by the fury of the gale, and flying upon the wind like some wild ghost, flapping, rolling, staggering. As if in sheer malice, it shot out from among the tree-trunks, and wrapped itself momentarily over the eyes of the outraged steed, which swerved, terrified, and bolted into the wood. Madly the creature strove to thrust itself in between the close-growing pines. Pluckily the

boy clung to his seat, though knocked violently against one obstacle after another in his hurtling progress. Finally, the horse attempted to rush through a narrow space between two extra strong and large trees, and the rider came off, but not before one leg had been horribly crushed in the struggle.

His right knee proved to be so badly lacerated that amputation was at first thought inevitable. By the skill of the surgeon this was obviated, but the snapping of a tendon produced a life-long stiffness of the joint and for a year or two prevented his indulging in any kind of athletics.

The isolation of mind and body which resulted fostered his already existing tendency to morbidity. At Oxford he withdrew himself as much as he could from society, becoming more morose as his former friends, tired of being repulsed, left him by degrees more and more to himself. At Oxford, one Commemoration week, he met the beautiful Virginia Sheringham, and fell so violently in love that his natural reserve was swept out of sight, and he conquered by sheer force of will. This girl became his idol, his universe, his obsession. For her he would work unceasingly, remove mountains, make a name, make a fortune.

Perhaps he should have thought himself lucky that so fascinating a young lady endured a whole year of so unpromising an engagement. At first she was taken off her feet by the violence of his passion, the impetuosity of his wooing. Very soon, however, her natural prudence began to get the upper hand. What, she very properly asked herself, could be the outcome of this long-drawn affair? The love-letters which at first had been so irresistible, inevitably palled on repetition. Moreover, one cannot buy new frocks with love-letters. Perhaps she announced the end of it all too suddenly. Yet it is doubtful whether any preliminary hinting could have made Osbert believe that

his adored one could possibly be contemplating the treachery of jilting him.

The thing was done. It had to be done, for Virginia had given her lover a whole year, and a maiden's market is short. Unfortunately, the young man involved belonged to that pitiable but happily small minority with whom to love seems final, who cannot rally from the blow given by the beloved hand.

Everything was against Gaunt's recovery. He had no friends. His nearest relatives were the old great-aunts at Omberleigh, who understood him not at all, and liked him but little. During his engagement he flung away every other interest, every other resource, to give himself up to the passion which filled him. His jilting was for him the end of all things. For the first few years he disappeared from England, became a special correspondent at out-of-the-way spots such as Valparaiso, visited such outposts of empire as the Solomon Islands. Then the last surviving aunt passed away from Omberleigh. He found that the place was his, and he decided to occupy it, since he had formed a plan which needed residence in England for its maturing.

He had thought, during those years of wandering, upon one subject only. The behaviour of Virginia Sheringham had been brought to the bar of his judgment. She had been tried, and found guilty on every count. She had been treacherous, light, covetous, cruel, selfish, and callous. For these things he decided that she deserved punishment. Why should he suffer as for years he had suffered, while the criminal went scot free?

He had money now. Money was power. One day his turn would come. He could wait for it.

As the waiting went on he grew used to it. He lived in an atmosphere of it. One day this long-planned thing would happen, this long-prepared design would material-

ise. He hardly noticed the flight of the years. He hardly noticed any material or outward circumstances, except the development of his land. He lived in the nursing, the contemplation, the fondling, of an idea of future vengeance and retribution, when Virginia Sheringham should be at his mercy, and should plead to him — and plead in vain.

When at last the scheme did really mature, when the mortgage fell in, he could hardly realise that this had actually happened. He felt dazed, like a man who has lived for years in the dark when he is faced with sudden daylight.

It was all happening so ludicrously as he had foreseen. Mrs. Mynors had found out who was the mortgagee, and she had made an appeal — just the kind of appeal he had expected. He found himself taking a ticket for a journey to London for the first time during years.

There was nothing to do in London. To wait patiently there was by no means the easy matter that it was in the country, in the midst of his own work upon his own land. To occupy himself he went and saw pictures. He had a taste for pictures, though he never indulged it by buying any.

This it was which brought him to Hertford House, and suggested to him a totally new idea — an idea so brilliant, and yet so horrible, that it attracted and repelled him both at once. The shock of the sight of Virginia the younger was so great as partially to unnerve him. Her daughter! He had never thought about her children, except when the death of her son and heir, by means of the motor accident, had appeared in the paper, and he had been glad.

Now here was something like a resurrection of the Virginia of twenty years ago. He contemplated her, considered her, appraised her. The whole appearance of her

was to him the top-note of luxury, extravagance, affectation. Long residence in the country, avoidance of women, had made him unaccustomed to the growing call for elaborate taste in feminine attire. He had never seen anything like the slim perfection of Virginia. He listened while girl-like she prattled of the costumes of the pictured women on the walls. He heard her wonder gravely whether she could wear rose-colour and contrast her own style with that of her friend!

She stood, to the man who glowered upon her, for the incarnation of a type. She was the temptress woman, who would, as her mother had done, enslave and then forsake. Could he prevent the life-long unhappiness of some unfortunate man, by exerting his own will, his own wealth to get the siren into his power?

He marked the arrival of Gerald Rosenberg. His faculties, sharpened to the point of brilliance by his own keen personal hatred, discerned the situation between the two young people. Upon the upshot of it depended all his own plans. If Gerald hesitated — if he took time for reflection — then Gaunt would have a chance to carry out a scheme of retribution more complete than anything of which he had yet dreamed. In his pocket was a letter from his old love — a letter which he described to himself as loathsome. It told him, practically, that she was his for the asking. What a buffet in the face for her, if he should propose for her daughter! And what a hold upon the entire family if he could catch the mercenary young adventuress, and keep her caged, and mould her to his will!

And it had all happened so marvellously according to his plan.

He succeeded not merely as well as he hoped, but far more easily. He was met more than half-way, both by mother and daughter. Gerald Rosenberg had evidently

hung fire. The dressed-up doll which looked so fair and innocent was ready to consent to the sale of herself — to the shameful bargain which he had proposed. So he had taken her hand — led her into the steel jaws of his trap. It had closed upon her, and she lay at the bottom, lacerated, helpless, awaiting the moment when her captor should come and devour her.

He felt as might a hunter, who, having laid a snare for a man-eating tigress, comes creeping through the woods at dawn, and finds the pit occupied by a strayed lamb.

From the moment of reading the two letters which yesterday had passed between the sisters, he knew that his weapon had broken in his hand.

The dreadful thing was that, having made captive this helpless creature, towards whom his ill-will was no longer active, he was unable to release her.

And what could he do with her?

He had saddled himself for life with a female companion, of whom he had no need at all. What satisfaction could be derived from asserting his mastery over one so weak, so submissive, so — so confoundedly childish? As to making friends with her, the prospects of that were not encouraging. His treatment of her yesterday must have made a deep impression. Besides, he felt within himself no hankering at all after a *rapprochement*. Since his wife could not feed his hate, nor satisfy his vengeance, he had, quite frankly, no use for her.

Yet she was there. What was he to do with her?

As the endless complications — the annoying changes to be wrought in his life by the introduction of such trying persons as Joey Ferris into his hitherto unmolested retreat — as all this swept over him, he realised that he had overshot his mark and landed himself in unforeseen difficulties and vexations. Some gratifications still remained — for instance, the prospect of reading and of answering

his mother-in-law's first letter, appealing for more money! Ah, that still lay in the future, along with her inevitable suggestion that she should come for a "nice long visit" to Omberleigh, and his blunt refusal of her company!

In her, at least, he had not been mistaken. It was only in the case of this artless, babyish creature upstairs that he had made such an ass of himself.

Shrugging his shoulders, he turned slowly away from the doorway, and betook himself to his study. There he sat down and wrote a message.

The doctor tells me you need rest, and should be left quite quiet. That being so, I feel sure that I had better keep away altogether. But there is something I have to say, so will you, for the sake of appearances, grant me a few minutes' conversation this afternoon. Choose your own time.— O. G.

CHAPTER XIV

INSTANTANEOUS CONVERSION

"I was a moody comrade to her then,
For all the love I bore her. . . .
. . . This had come to be
A game to play, a love to clasp, a hate
To wreak, all things together that a man
Needs for his blood to ripen. . . .
. . . In those hours no doubt
To the young girl, my eyes were like my soul,—
Dark wells of death-in-life that yearned for day."—
— D. G. ROSSETTI.

A PENCIL note was brought downstairs to the master by Grover, who wore a demure look, as though she guessed how novel and charming a pastime to the woman-hater was this playful exchange of love-letters.

He was seated at the lunch-table when the little envelope was handed to him, and a surly self-consciousness kept him from opening it until Hemming had retired, which conduct on his part caused amused nudgings between the servants outside.

Please come to tea at four.— VIRGINIA.

Such was the extent of the "love-letter" when he had opened it.

He shrugged his shoulders. He did not want to have tea with her in the least. However, it would have a good effect upon the household — keep up the fiction of their mutual desire for each other's society.

At a few minutes after four, he knocked at her door. Grover had just arranged the tea-table close to the bed,

and was putting away one or two things before leaving the room. Virginia blushed brightly as her jailer entered, but gave him a timid smile of welcome. She told Grover, with whom she was evidently on the best of terms already, to set a chair for him, directed the closing of one window, lest there be too much draught; and so did the honours until the maid, benevolently smiling, had disappeared.

The bride knew that even a minute's hesitation would make her too nervous to speak, so she said at once: "It was kind of you to send for the doctor, but indeed there was no need. I shall be well in a very few days. I feel rested already."

"That's right," he said briefly. "Proper treatment will bring you round sooner, I expect."

"I like Dr. Dymock," she said timidly.

"He's not a bad sort."

A silence ensued. How difficult it was to find things to say. Virginia made another effort. "Grover is so kind, she waits on me hand and foot!"

"It's her work to wait on you. What she's paid for. I don't know why you should call her kind."

"Don't you know," she asked earnestly, "the difference between the work you can pay for and the work you can't? Oh, but I am sure you must."

He grunted. Evidently he was not interested, but bored. She offered him more tea, and refrained from further efforts at talk, remembering his sneer at her "prattle."

They were too utterly out of sympathy for her to have any idea of how best to approach him.

He drank his second cup of tea in silence, his gaze travelling over the room, over the dressing-table with its dainty appointments, over the white silk kimono, embroidered in faintly coloured flowers, which his bride wore. The loose sleeve revealed the thinness of her arm

and wrist, which her dresses had formerly more or less concealed. On her white flesh he remarked a row of round purple marks. Had she rubbed her arm on something dirty? What could have caused those stains? They looked like finger-marks. The memory of yesterday — of their tussle, and his snatching of the letter from her desperate grip — came suddenly to him.

Could it be true that he, Osbert Gaunt, with the upbringing and traditions of a gentleman, had left the marks of his hands upon a fragile girl? Self-disgust turned him for a moment almost sick.

Yet he would say what he had come to say. He cleared his throat.

"The doctor suggested to me that he should send our neighbour, Mrs. Ferris, to call upon you in a day or two. I don't suppose you will like her much, but she is about the only person available. She is one of nature's mistakes — daughter of a colonel, and ought to have worked in a factory. However, they tell me she is a good sort. She has a motor, and would take you for a spin. I want you to understand that, if you go out with her, it is only on conditions — that it would be of no use for you to attempt to escape."

Virgie was so surprised that she dropped the sugar-tongs. "To escape!"

"From me."

"I don't understand ——"

"I think you do. If Mrs. Ferris motors you to any place where there is a railway station you might be tempted to take the train and go off. I ought to tell you that if you do, I shall bring you back."

"You suppose that I should — that I should let Mrs. Ferris into the secret of my — of your — of our ——"

"What more likely?"

"If you think so," replied Virginia with shaking voice,

"please don't let Mrs. Ferris come. I did not ask — you must not think I asked the doctor — for company or complained of loneliness. I am ——" she could not go on.

"Have I your word that if I allow you to go about as you like you will make no attempt to leave me?"

"Would you take my word?" she cried vehemently; then checked herself, and seemed to hold herself quiet by an act of will.

"The doctor told me that you ought not to be distressed, that perfect rest was necessary for you," said Gaunt, rising abruptly from his seat. "Don't upset yourself, I didn't mean to bully. I will take it for granted that you will do as I wish, now that you know what my wishes are. Good afternoon."

She did not answer. She had turned her face inwards to the pillow, and her slight shoulders were shaking. He stood a moment, contemplating her in dark vexation. Then he went out of the room, annoyed with himself, but still more annoyed with her.

His mind was chaotic. He had just been wondering what he could do with her — how deal with the preposterous situation he had himself created — and hardly had the thoughts formed themselves before he was found threatening her with penalties in case she should attempt to disembarrass him of her presence. Dimly he descried the reason of this apparent inconsistency. It was that he knew her to be spiritually free of him. He could not bear that she should be actually free as well. After all, he had married her. He had his rights. He was her husband. But, Oh, ye gods, what a child she was — how easily cowed, how shrinking and timid and all the other things that he hated!

From the bottom of his heart he wished that he had never set eyes upon her.

. . . . . .

The following morning the post-bag, when it was brought to him at breakfast time, contained two letters for Virginia. One was addressed in the unformed, sprawling hand which he knew to be Pansy's. The other was inscribed with a flowing, ornamental script which once had power to illuminate the world for him, and now produced in his fermenting mind the most curious mixture of rage, bitterness, and gratification.

He had determined yesterday to abandon his cruel intention of overlooking his wife's correspondence. His perusal of Pansy's letter had been enough. This sight of his mother-in-law's writing, however, touched him upon the corrupt spot in his heart, and shook his resolution.

He laid the letter down among his own, before Grover, who waited near, had seen the address. The letter from Pansy he handed to her as it was, and joyfully it was received by its lawful recipient when it arrived upstairs upon her breakfast tray, the sanctity of its seal inviolate.

When he was alone, Gaunt leaned forward, his elbows propped upon the table, and held Mrs. Mynors' envelope in the steam of the spirit kettle which stood upon the silver tray.

It was easily opened. He drew forth the contents with a detestable eagerness, and read as follows:

My dearest girl,—

This is the first moment that I have felt able to write to you, so great have been my sufferings, so keen my humiliation over this mercenary marriage of yours. I feel as if I had been living in a nightmare ever since that fatal day when I went to town to meet the inhuman monster who almost blighted my young life, and has now fastened his claws into you instead.

Oh, Virginia! Sooner — far sooner — would I have gone to the workhouse than be obliged to think of you in

Gaunt's power! But you knew that! Again and again did I assure you, did I not, how far I was from demanding this sacrifice at your hands? How is he using you? That is the question that forces itself upon me every hour — that keeps me awake at night with the horrors! Your letter to Pansy was more or less reassuring, I must own. Perhaps, when he finds how useful and domestic you are, he may be kinder than my fears suggest?

Meantime, I miss you every moment. You will know how I have always detested the petty meannesses of life, the half-pounds of cooking butter, the scraps for the stock-pot, the way the coal disappears, the price of fish — all the endless, nauseating haggling over pence! To this you have left me, after all that I have suffered. After the shattering blows of the death of my first-born, my widowhood, our ruin — you have taken the hand of a man who can give you life's good things, and you have left me to the slavery which you found so unbearable. But I must not reproach you, for you may be already suffering for your mistake. Do write me a few lines, and tell me frankly how he is treating you?

If I am wrong, if he is behaving kindly to you, it will be such a relief to know it. He may, of course, actually have fallen in love with your looks. You are, as all declare, absurdly like me. If this should be so, I know, my darling daughter, that you will use your opportunity to help me. You must see that the allowance secured to me is wretchedly inadequate. £300 a year is impossible. It will mean an existence of continual debt. £400 — that is, a hundred pounds a quarter — might be conceivable. It is the very lowest upon which one should be called upon to live. If Gaunt is inclined to be indulgent — if you have managed to get on his blind side — do strike while the iron is hot, and have this matter arranged for me, won't you?

It is not as if I asked for riches. Think of what I have been used to? Think of me here in this odious little town, non-existent as far as the county is concerned — Me, Mrs. Bernard Mynors — a prouder name than that of many a peer. Think of this in your luxury, and spare a little pity for your wretched mother.

VIRGINIA MYNORS.

Before that letter, Gaunt sat with clenched hands. The veins in his forehead swelled. How right he had been — how fatally exact in his forecast as far as the mother was concerned! How far was he right, after all, about the daughter?

Could that letter of hers to Pansy have conceivably been written as a blind — in case he should read it? No. That was not possible — at least it was not possible that Pansy's letter to her sister could have been the result of any kind of premeditation. Besides, the doctor's evidence of his wife's starved condition. Yet here were reproaches for the girl who had been obstinately bent upon a mercenary marriage — a sacrifice which she seemed to have made against her mother's pleadings!

How did the rest of the letter harmonise with the outburst of maternal agony which began it? His lip curled, ever more and more, until all his teeth showed, as he read once more the suggestion that, if he had been successfully hoodwinked, he might be bled for an extra hundred a year! As he sat, staring at the paper, he knew one thing certainly. *He must see the reply to that letter.* Moreover, Virginia must write it under the impression that he would *not* see it.

He hardly knew himself as he carefully resealed the envelope, and satisfied himself that it bore no signs of having been tampered with. In that moment he felt that he recked neither of his honour nor of his manhood. He

had no scruples. One thing only stood out in his mind as essential. He must know how far his wife was victim and martyr, how far a designing girl.

If she was, as her mother declared her to be — mercenary, then there were ways, plenty of ways, in which she might do penance for such fault. But, if it were true that she had been sacrificed for pure love, that her unselfishness was so wonderful, so unheard-of, that she really had laid down her all upon the altar of family affection — why, then, what would happen? He asked himself desperately, what *could* happen? The only solution that occurred to him at the moment was that he should hang himself.

. . . . . .

When Virginia's tea went upstairs that afternoon, her mother's letter lay upon the tray, as though it had arrived by the second post. With it was a note from Gaunt, to the effect that he was sorry to have to be out that afternoon. An accident had happened on the estate — a large tree had fallen, most unexpectedly, and the huge trunk had blocked the course of the trout-stream, and the water was flooding a meadow. He hoped to look in upon her that evening on his return. Then, below his initials:

For the future I waive my right to inspect your correspondence.

It was late when he came in, wet to the knees and tired out. He had a bath, changed for the evening, and then, before going downstairs, rapped on the door of communication between his own room and Virginia's.

Grover was not there, so there was nobody to see that the bride turned as white as a sheet. She had not known, for certain, that his room adjoined her own.

"Come in," she faltered. He pushed the door wide. She was on a sofa, in the window, and the late evening

light shone through her hair as she turned to him that face which might have been an angel's. It was the face that had stood for him for so many years as the expression of treachery incarnate. Now it gave him the most extraordinary sensation.

For the first time in their mutual acquaintance she did not smile. Her look as she faced him was grave and cold. It seemed that at last his repeated insults had quenched her timid impulse to friendliness. The thought affected him profoundly.

"I hope you haven't been too lonely this afternoon?" he asked haltingly, standing in the doorway.

"No, not at all. Mrs. Ferris came to see me."

"Ha! How did you like her?"

"She seems very kind." The tone was entirely noncommittal. It seemed to say, "Whether I liked her or not is no concern of yours."

"H'm! Did she say anything about taking you out in the motor?"

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I said I would rather not go."

"You would rather not go?"

She turned her eyes away from him, out to the garden, and did not speak. He remembered what he had said the previous day, and guessed how it must have hurt her, if she were really what he was beginning to believe.

His next words were utterly unpremeditated. "I'll buy a car and take you out myself."

"That would be safer," she replied gravely. Then she raised herself on her elbow, searched among her papers on a little table at her side, and held out a letter to him.

"Will you put that out to be posted, please?"

He limped across the room and stood quite near — rear enough to take the envelope from her hand.

"You read what I said about your correspondence?"

"Yes." He thought he could detect an impulse to say "Thank you," and the determination not to yield to it. Thanks for the right to breathe! The right to be herself! He saw that she could not frame it.

The sound of the gong in the hall below was audible. He turned away — lingered, trying to put together some sentence expressive of his satisfaction that she should be on the sofa to-day, but he found the thing too difficult, and was off with a curt, "Well, good night!"

"Good night," she answered.

When he was back at the door, he turned again and looked at her. Her whole fair outline, supine upon the couch, was illumined in a rosy gilding. The room behind her lay shadowy; her own form on its dark side was blurred. But that outline against the purple misty garden without was like a thing of enchantment. So still — so very beautiful — he thought of an effigy upon a tomb. He closed the door with a hissing breath drawn between his teeth. In his hand he held the key to all his doubt — the reply to the letter he had read. When he had also read this he would know what he must do; he would be able to realise what he had already done.

He hastened downstairs feeling like a thief in his own house. He resented the fact of Hemming's quite natural presence in the hall, where the servant was busy removing the sticks, wet gloves, etc., which he had discarded upon his return home. He disappeared into his study, and sat down, wondering how his nefarious purpose could be best achieved, as there was no fire and no spirit-kettle handy. At first he thought he would have to wait until the following morning; but he believed that he should not sleep unless he had snatched the knowledge he so inordinately desired.

He dined morosely, and there was sympathy in the

kitchen for his lack of appetite. It was not surprising to Hemming when he brought coffee to find it declined, and to be ordered to bring in the small spirit-kettle and the whisky decanter.

Alone at last, with the desired jet of steam, the monomaniac once more settled himself to his novel pursuit of tampering with seals. He had done so this morning without scruple. The letter he now held seemed to him far more sacred than the other. The blood rushed to his face, and his heart beat heavily as he peeled back the flap of the envelope. He felt almost as he might have felt had he intruded upon Virginia herself, as if he violated something pure and intact.

The letter was withdrawn. It lay under his relentless gaze. He took a peep into his wife's very soul.

Mother! Mother!

If you had known how it would hurt, you could not have written to me so! What can I say to you? Can I reproach my own mother with injustice? Yet I feel I cannot let you write as you do without telling you how unkind it sounds.

What I have done is wrong. I know that now. I half knew it all the time. But what else was there for me to do? I believe God knows I did it for the best. I was at the very end of all my own strength; I was at the very end of all our money; I had you all dependent upon me; and I knew I was going to break down.

I felt I had to serve you, and, oh, mother, you can't, you simply mustn't, deny that I have done that. Don't, for pity's sake, talk of my going off to be rich, and leaving you to the slavery that I found unbearable. That is not just, it is not true, but all the same it is torture to me that you should say it.

The unfairness of it gives me strength to write what

perhaps I might not dare if I were not so indignant, but it has to be said. Never, never, under any circumstances, will I ask Osbert to do more for you than he has already done. Please understand that that is my last word. Last year we lived on less than £200, including Tony's school bills, which you will not now have to pay. With care, you ought to be quite comfortable on what you have.

I do not know whether Osbert means to make me any allowance. He has said nothing about it yet, and I cannot ask him. If he does, you shall have anything I can spare, you know how little I want myself. At least, I ought to be able to keep Tony in pocket-money, the darling has suffered so from not having any. At this moment I have five shillings in the world, which I must use to buy materials to embroider a kimono for my Pansy. I promised her that! It is to be blue, with pale pink embroidery. Tell her I have not forgotten; I will get it next time I go out shopping.

I have been resting all yesterday and to-day, and I think I shall soon pick up my strength; but not if you write me such cruel letters. Oh, mother, for father's sake, who told me always to take care of you, don't let me think that what I have done has been all in vain!

VIRGINIA.

Osbert Gaunt pushed back his chair. His face was ghastly, and the drops stood on his forehead. He felt as if the house were too small, too close, to contain him. With shaking hands he pushed the letter and its envelope into a drawer, stumbled to his feet, hastened from the room, snatched a hat from the hall, and went out into the moonlight.

He walked on blindly, striding fast, taking the direction that led him down into the long avenue through the park, from which one approached the house upon its

southern side. He knew now what he had done. He had immolated an innocent victim. He felt as if there might be blood upon his hands. Stories are told of men who, having lost the use of a portion of the brain, have had this restored by means of a sudden shock or a terrific blow. Something of the kind had now happened to Gaunt. He looked back upon the man whom he had been, whom he had gradually become, during the past twenty years, as upon a leper. He shuddered at the very idea of such a monster.

Always before the eye of his imagination was the outline of Virginia's pale beauty, suffused with rose and gold. He recalled her patient quietude, her dignity and sadness. He knew now what she had been feeling. She had been quivering under the lash of her mother's diabolical selfishness; she had just relieved the anguish of her soul by writing that letter.

And he! What of the man who had tempted her?

A wild idea of crawling to her feet, of kissing them, of crying to her for pardon, turned him about and sent him striding unevenly half a mile upon his homeward way.

The futility of such a course suddenly struck him and once more turned him back.

She might pardon. Yes. She was the sort of nature that would pardon. How might that help their future together? He knew that there could be no such thing as a future together for them. He hardly wished it.

His passion of pity and remorse was quite untinged with any passion of desire. He thought of Virgie as of a saint, a creature apart, something to be rescued from himself, if such an end could possibly be compassed. If he spoke to her, if he begged forgiveness, he would have to confess his own late action. He would have to say: "I am such a cad, so lost to any sense of honour, that I

first assured you of the safety of your private correspondence, and then deliberately read it."

He could not do that.

To one emotion of the human soul this man had been for years a stranger — tenderness.

The first invasion of his breast by the new-comer was torture. He had not wept since he could remember. Now his lashes were thick with the drops which the pathos of Virginia wrung from his unwilling spirit. He contemplated her as a man may study the outstanding merits of his patron saint, seeing her inner and her outward loveliness. Her reticence — the way in which she concealed from her mother all that he had made her bear! She made no complaint, left herself almost completely out of sight, was only passionately anxious for reassurance, to be consoled by the knowledge that her sacrifice had not been in vain for *them!* Pity flooded him. When he had been walking a long way he became aware that he was sobbing audibly.

This pain of unavailing compassion was maddening. What could he do? He had humiliated this rare creature, laid rough hands upon her, borne her off far from every one she loved. Yes, incredible though it seemed, she actually loved that mother — that trivial wanton upon whom he himself had lavished all that was best in him during the long, fruitless years that the locust had eaten.

Frustration — misunderstanding — injustice — and helpless regret!

This is life, and the old Greeks knew it. He thought of the majestic dramas of wrong and passion and irretrievable disaster. He thought of Clytemnestra and Electra. They sound crude to us, the ancient stories — crude and bloody. We do not slay our husbands with axes in these days. Virginia Sheringham had not, in act,

been an unfaithful wife; but by her neglect, her lightness, her extravagance and selfishness, she had ruined her husband financially, had contributed to his early death. . . .

. . . And she had handed over her daughter to Gaunt as calmly as Clytemnestra handed over Electra to the swine-herd.

Human nature — ancient — modern! The setting different, the actions different, the motives eternally the same.

. . . . . .

It was nearly two o'clock when, weary and footsore, Gaunt let himself in with his latch-key, through the door left purposely unlocked by Hemming, who was wholly astonished at finding that his master was out of doors when it came to shutting-up time.

Like a thief he crept to the study, re-sealed with infinite precaution the envelope he had opened, and slipped it into the post-bag.

Later, as he lay rigid, open-eyed, in his bed, watching the dawn creep on, it almost seemed to him as if the tumult and energy of his thoughts must travel through the door and penetrate to the silent room within — to the little golden head which, please God, was forgetting its sorrows temporarily in dreams.

If he could but send her a wordless message — some deep impression of penitence, of reverence, of his hunger to be forgiven!

Could this indeed be Gaunt of Omberleigh? Changed, the whole structure of his character demolished in a few hours by mere contact with the crystal honesty of a very simple girl!

CHAPTER XV

NO PLACE OF REPENTANCE

"The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on. Nor all your piety nor wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it."
— OMAR KHAYYÁM.

NEXT morning, when Virginia's breakfast-tray went up, there lay upon it a fat envelope, addressed to her in pencil by Gaunt. It contained a packet of bank-notes, with the intimation that this was her first quarter's allowance of pocket-money. He added that he should expect her to keep an account of what she spent, and that her account-book should be accessible to him on demand.

He hardly knew how to describe the impulse which made him throw in that stipulation. It came primarily from a desire to gloat over the beauties of this character so suddenly revealed to him. He wanted to know what proportion of his somewhat lavish gift was spent upon herself, and how much went to the shark at Laburnum Villa.

There was another lurking idea. He could not, or, rather, would not, fling away his control over her while as yet he had no other ties with which to bind her to himself. Had he yielded to his first impulse, and thrown himself at her feet for pardon, the result could be easily forecast. She would give him a gentle, chilly forgiveness, and he would have to step back and let her go, see her pass away altogether, without any knowledge of him, ignorant of what manner of man he really was.

If he abandoned his present position entirely, he must, logically, admit that he had no more right to her than the nearest man breaking stones in the road. She would stoop to bestow forgiveness, and then depart; and it dawned upon him that, embarrassing though her presence had now become, her absence would be worse. These few days of her sojourn had already wrought a subtle change in all about him. When he met Grover coming upstairs with a tray, her face wore a look of interest, of sympathy, which he had never before observed. She had taken to putting flowers about the rooms — a wholly new departure at Omberleigh. Only that morning he had caught Mrs. Wells half-way upstairs with a sheepish expression of countenance, and something concealed under her apron, which, on inquiry, was admitted to be kittens, the mistress having expressed a desire for their company. After the woman had passed, he lingered on the stairs, heard her admitted, heard the little spontaneous exclamation of pleasure which greeted the appearance of the babes. The chattering, laughing voices of Wells and Grover were blended with a faint mewing. It was all very childish, and as he went down he thought he scorned it. But if it were all to cease?

These considerations, formless and not consciously held, were, as a fact, of more weight with him than even the other aspect of the question — the scandal that would arise, the talk that must ensue, the contemptuous pity that he might receive — should his marriage experiment abruptly terminate at the end of so brief a trial. Just then he saw no way to end the present situation. He must wait and allow it to develop. He must make further proof of the spotless integrity of his wife. She was not strong enough to face a scene as yet. He could not see clearly, his thoughts were confused. For the first time in twenty years he found himself no longer pursuing one aim with

reckless disregard of everything else, but fumbling, hesitating, uncertain what to do.

He was a J.P., and this was his day for sitting on the bench. He had a long way to drive to the court. It was an important occasion, since there had been considerable disorder in Hoadlam, a large manufacturing town, and many of those implicated came from his own district. Gaunt's knowledge of law was valuable to his fellow magistrates, and he had had the previous day a note from Lord St. Aukmund congratulating him on his marriage, but begging him not to let his honeymoon prevent him from attending that day. This note Gaunt enclosed with the bank-notes to his wife, telling her that he must be away all day. He added:

If Mrs. Ferris asks you again to go out with her, I should advise your accepting if you feel well enough.

That day was pouring wet, and he reached home so late that it seemed wrong to disturb Virginia. The next morning Hugh Caunter came for him before seven o'clock. The flooding of the meadow where the tree had fallen had become serious. Gaunt arose and went out, breakfasted with Caunter at his house, and did not get home till nearly noon. He returned by the uphill avenue which approached the house by way of the garden — that avenue down which he had plunged in the moonlight, trying to allay the disorder of his mind after reading Virginia's letter.

As he walked somewhat slowly up the road, which grew steeper as it entered the garden, he heard the sound of voices on the breeze. The morning, which had broken cloudy, had developed into a fine, warm day. The heavy rain of yesterday had brought out the scents of the flowers, and the very earth was fragrant. On the terrace, in a lounge chair, lay Virginia, and Joey Ferris was sitting

near, relating something in her loud, hearty tones, some story which brought laughter from the listening girl.

Gaunt's heart began to thump. He had not seen her since his treachery and subsequent conversion. He left the avenue and struck into a path which would bring him to where they sat. The chair in which his wife was placed had a striped awning to keep her from the sun. She therefore wore no hat. He thought her more like a patron saint — a Virgin martyr — than ever. The background might have been the canopy in some old Florentine painting, with a glimpse of flowery garden seen beyond.

He had the mortification of seeing the laughter wiped from her face as she caught sight of him.

"There is my husband," said she to Joey; and Mrs. Ferris jumped up, too eager to shower congratulations upon the bridegroom to heed the expression of either face.

She ran along the terrace to meet him, intercepted him, shook hands as with the handle of a pump, shouted her chaff upon his change of attitude towards things feminine. He bore it marvellously, managing to approach nearer Virginia's chair while the storm broke over him. As soon as he could get in a word:

"You are very good," he said, "and I expect I deserve all you say. Men, after all, are only very moderately intelligent animals, you know. They have to wait until some lady takes enough interest in them to teach them these things. But forgive me a moment — I had to go out before seven this morning, and have not seen my wife. I must just ask her how she is."

He drew up a chair close to the couch, and took an unwilling hand in his. Things psychological did not, as a rule, interest him, but now he found himself wondering how it was possible to withdraw all response from a warm, living hand, so that it should lie in one's own like something dead.

"How are you this morning?" he asked.

His eyes seemed to her to be imploring her to play up, not to allow Mrs. Ferris to suppose that she was scared. "Why, you can see how much better I am," she answered, responding to the unspoken desire, but withdrawing her hand from his clasp. "Here am I out here in the sunshine, and it is so nice. I am planning what you ought to do with this terrace garden. Mrs. Ferris is fond of gardens, too."

"Indeed!" He turned politely to Joey. "You're not satisfied with mine, either of you, that's evident," he said, with an immense effort to be friendly.

"Oh, it isn't my place to criticise," laughed Joey gaily. "But Mrs. Gaunt has got taste. She says she has been lying at her window, the past few days, thinking what she could do here; and if it was done, you'd have the show-garden of the county!"

"If she wants it done, you may feel pretty sure it will be done," said Gaunt; and he saw the slight curl of the mouth he was watching, at what Virginia took to be a cruel bit of mockery. "I am much indebted to you, Mrs. Ferris, for coming to cheer up my girl," he went on hurriedly. "She is doing a kind of rest-cure, you know, and it's rather hard lines, both on her and me. However, it is very necessary. She has been overtaxing her strength for months, and we must be patient until she is quite strong again."

"You're a regular trump," replied Joey with warmth. "You bet she'll pick up soon enough in this air, and with everything she wants. I am coming to fetch her in the motor this afternoon. Shall you mind if I take her home to tea? I want to show her my kiddies."

He expressed his entire willingness that they should amuse themselves as they liked, and for some minutes the talk sounded almost natural.

"Have you pressed Mrs. Ferris to stay to lunch, Virginia?" asked Gaunt after ten minutes' chat.

She lifted her eyes to his as she answered quite shortly: "No."

"But, of course, you understand that we shall insist upon your staying?" said Gaunt almost courteously to the visitor.

"Jolly nice of you, but can't be done," replied Joey. "Got my old man and the kiddies to consider. They have a kind of idea that they can't eat their food unless I'm there. I must be off at once." She stood up. "You see, I came on foot, through the woods, and I must get back, because I have to bring round the car, and also to get my big coat. Mind you see that your Dresden china there is well wrapped up, won't you?"

"It must be over a mile through the woods," objected Gaunt, rising. "Let me order the cart ——"

She cut him short. "Bless the man! What's a mile? I do it in ten. I'm as strong as a horse. No, you don't come with me. Stop along o' your missus. I know every step of the way."

He accompanied her to the end of the terrace, saw her run down the hill and disappear through the little gate into the woods. Then he came slowly back to where his wife lay awaiting him with lowered lids. She was softly stroking two of the kittens who lay curled into balls in her lap.

He sat down again beside her. His vicinity made her quiver, but she controlled her nerves valiantly.

"Thank you for the note you sent me yesterday," she said, "and the enclosure. I do not want so large an allowance as you are giving me."

"Try it for a year," he told her. "If it is too much, you need not spend it. Save it up against a rainy day."

"*A year!*" The words escaped her unawares. It was

as if she said, "*A century!*" Well, he had told her it was a life-sentence. The prospect of that future made the sunshine dim, and for a moment she felt as though she could not bear it.

"While we are on the subject," he went on, ignoring the faint cry, though he heard it well enough, "I mean the subject of allowances, I am wondering whether I am allowing your mother enough. Since I saw you first I have let Lissendean at a very good rent, and I have been thinking I might spare another hundred ——"

"Stop!" She was quite white — even her lips lost colour. "On no account!" she gasped. "It is quite enough — more than enough! You have bought me and paid the price. It is done with. I can't talk about it."

Her pallor frightened him. "By all means, if it affects you so," he replied at once. "I certainly don't want to bother you. Sorry I blunder so badly. Let us talk of something else. How did you get downstairs this morning?"

"Hemming was very clever. He remembered that the old ladies who lived here had a carrying-chair, and he found it in the coach-house. He scrubbed it, and Grover and he carried me down quite easily."

"Here comes Hemming to say that our lunch is ready," he broke in. "I can carry you indoors."

"Oh, no, no, please!" she broke out in distaste which she could not control. "Hemming is bringing the chair. Don't trouble yourself — I can easily ——"

Hemming was quite near, so Gaunt made no further protest. Grover had likewise appeared, and soon had the invalid carefully placed in the chair.

"Doctor said this morning that 'twould do her no harm to put her feet down for meals, provided she don't stand on 'em," she remarked; and the two men picked up and carried the light weight into the house.

There was little embarrassment during lunch, for they were not *tête-à-tête*. Grover and Hemming seemed to be hovering about Mrs. Gaunt all the time with little dishes specially prepared, and they did not withdraw finally until the cheese was on the table. Then, indeed, silence dropped deeply. Evidently Virginia had come to the end of her former policy. He was to have no more "prattle." She sat quite silent, sipping her prescribed champagne and eating a biscuit.

Gaunt lit a cigarette, and smoked for a few minutes without attempting conversation. Then he rose, laying the stump carefully in his plate, and came to the hearth-rug, half-way between his place and hers.

"You would like to go up to your room and rest before getting ready for your drive?" he asked.

"Presently, thank you — when Hemming comes back."

"I can carry you quite easily. I should like to."

"I would rather not. Please let me wait."

He came a step nearer. "Is it that you don't want to give me trouble, or that you won't let me touch you?" he asked with a sort of breathlessness.

"Oh, of course, because you must not take the trouble," she faltered hastily, not daring to say that his other surmise was the truth. The sequel to this hollow politeness was what she might have imagined. "Then I shall take you."

He came close up, and she gave a little cry, rather like a small furry thing in a trap. The sound caused him to lose his head, and determine to do as he liked. Stooping, he placed his arms under her securely.

"Put your arms round my neck," he bade her curtly. She obeyed, as she had schooled herself to obey every direct order given by him.

He stood upright, raising her in his arms, and strode from the room with her. He could actually hear the

pulsings of her heart against his ear, and the hurry of her panting, sobbing breath.

He *was* her husband, and he *was* going to carry her upstairs, if he chose!

He did so without difficulty, and laid her down carefully upon the sofa in her room, looking with a wistfulness almost pitiful, had she seen it, upon her sick, averted face. Was there nothing — absolutely nothing — that he could say or do to wipe out the bitterness of his former conduct?

He took a turn through the room, walked to the window, stared moodily out upon the garden. He had an impulse to say to her: "The garden is yours, do as you like with it — order what you like — plan, direct, assume command." But what would that avail? See how she had received his lavish gift of money, his offer of an increased allowance to her mother! He had put himself out of court.

There were sounds of panting, and Grover's substantial foot caused the stairs to creak. She entered, flushed but beaming.

"If I didn't say so to Hemming! I says: 'See if he doesn't take and carry her up himself,' I says," she remarked brightly. "Now, ma'am, I suppose you will wear the dear little motor-bonnet and veil; but the puzzle is — what are you going to do for a coat? There isn't a thick one in all your things!"

Gaunt exploded in the window. "Great Scott, what do you suppose you are for, but to look to your mistress's things and see that she has what she wants?" he cried. "The moment you have finished dressing her, you sit down and write to London for fur coats — sable, seal — whatever she prefers, and make them send down a consignment to look at. Or perhaps I had better do it myself, as you seem so incompetent." He turned fiercely to

Virginia, whom sheer surprise had caused to sit up and stare. "You shall have a coat by to-night, if I go to London for it myself!" he stormed.

"Please, Osbert," said her clear voice, "you don't understand. I have a white serge coat which is warm enough for to-day, and you have given me plenty of money to buy myself a thicker one."

"There now, and I put it to air in the work-room," muttered Grover, who had stood like what is known as a "stuck pig" during her master's outburst, and who now hurried from the room, divided between laughter and anxiety.

"No wonder he's beside himself; but he shouldn't shout like that," she thought. "It's my belief he frightens her, and she won't get well while that goes on. Poor chap!"

Meanwhile, Gaunt, swept on by the impulse to do or say something that might please, was floundering worse than ever. "You must have a good coat," he hectored, standing over the sofa. "You can't buy that sort of thing out of a dress-allowance. I will give you one. I'll see that you have what's necessary. You mustn't risk taking a chill ——"

With a kind of bound she sat up, her hands clenched upon the cushions that supported her. Her expression checked his words in mid-flow.

"Stop, stop — you must *stop!*" she cried piercingly, "or I don't know what will happen! You think a woman is a thing you can beat, swear at, insult, and then appease with presents! Didn't I tell you I would have no gifts from you? I'll bear your unkindness, but I won't take your presents! If you could understand — oh, how can I make you understand?"

Lifting her hands, she held them before her, glaring upon them as if they were contaminated. Fumbling in her vehement haste, she pulled off her wedding-ring and

both the others which he had given her, and flung them upon the floor at his feet. "I wear them when I must," she sobbed out; "but at night I tear them off! I shake myself free of them, and then I feel clean — clean at last! I lie down in bed and tell myself that I am just Virgie Mynors again — as I used to be — ill, hungry, penniless — but clean! *Clean!*"

As suddenly as she had upreared herself she collapsed, hid her face and lay prone while the sobbing tore her and shook her slight frame.

He stood some seconds motionless. Her outburst seemed to have frozen him. Then, in silence, he picked up her rings, laid them on the little table at her side, and walked away into his own room, shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER XVI

RENOUNCEMENT

"I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight —
The thought of thee — and in the blue Heaven's height,
And in the sweetest passage of a song.

Oh, just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee awaits, hidden yet bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must go short of thee, the whole day long."

— ALICE MEYNELL.

IT was upon the following day that Dr. Dymock asked to see Gaunt, and with all the diplomacy that he could muster, begged him to keep away from his wife entirely for a fortnight at least.

"I do not like her state of evident mental tension," he said. "She seems strung up to an unnatural pitch, and in these cases we always find that the society of those who are nearest and dearest has a disturbing effect. The whole structure of your future happiness probably depends upon your patience and forbearance now. There are many girls who can, so to speak, take marriage in their stride, without its making any perceptible difference. She is not like that. She is acutely sensitive, just now abnormally so; and, unfortunately for you, she was at the time of her marriage seriously out of health. At present she is not what is unscientifically known as hysterical; but she might become so, as the result of quite a small error of judgment on our part. I shall make it clear to her that you are keeping away entirely out of consideration for her, and I

will also speak to your servants, who have been with you long, and are trustworthy. Nobody else need know anything of the matter. You could hardly have a better companion for her than Mrs. Ferris, who has no nerves, who is not observant, and who will keep her amused without wanting to pry into her feelings."

Gaunt was lighting a cigar, sheltering the match from the wind with his hand, so that his expression revealed nothing.

"I'll do anything on earth that you advise," he replied after a minute. "I expect you are right. I do blunder. I find myself blundering. The fact is, I know nothing of women. This was very sudden with me, and I — I haven't gone the right way to work. I need hardly say that her happiness is the first consideration."

"If you feel that, I expect it will all come right," Dymock told him hopefully. "Your forbearance is bound to impress her. I will see that it does impress her. In two or three weeks she will be a different creature. Even then you must let her come along at her own pace. She wants delicate handling."

Gaunt said nothing, but shrugged his shoulders as if he felt himself incapable of the requisite diplomacy. So the other went on:

"Of course, I guess at the circumstances. You fell abruptly in love — you found the lady in a position from which you felt she must be instantly rescued. Your marriage came, as it were, too early in the programme. Well — you must do what a good many other men have done successfully — begin your wooing after you are wed. I seem to have a pretty cool cheek, talking to you like this — what?"

"Circumstances justify you, I think," replied Gaunt. He did not speak as if he were offended, but his voice did not invite further admonition.

Dymock rose to go, and for the first time in his life found himself thinking sympathetically of Gaunt of Omberleigh. How was this affair going to pan out, he wondered.

He turned on the doorstep. "She's anxious about her little sister, I gather," said he.

"The child has been taken to London to undergo treatment," replied Gaunt. "Is she not doing well? I had not heard that."

"Oh, she was only moved to London yesterday, so nothing can be known yet. However, Mrs. Gaunt is anxious."

"Do you mean that she wants to be there? Ought one to let her go?" asked Gaunt, startled.

"On no account. She is quite unfit for such exertion. Only, if it can be done, arrange that she gets good news, that nobody writes disquieting bulletins."

"I'll see to that," replied Gaunt with emphasis, as the doctor rode off.

This was a chance to send a line to his mother-in-law — a chance of which he would take the fullest advantage. He would write also to the head of the nursing home where Pansy was installed, directing that his wife should be as much reassured as was consistent with the facts.

. . . . . .

During the days that followed found Gaunt himself the object of a universal sympathy and kindness. Dr. Dymock had dropped hints, among those of his patients best famed for gossiping, as to the chivalrous nature of the misogynist's marriage. It seemed that he had found a fair maiden languishing in bondage, and had endowed her with the half of his kingdom. Unfortunately, she had suffered so severely as to undermine her health, and the first task for the newly made husband was to have her properly nursed and fed.

This, of course, explained why he had not taken her upon a wedding tour. That would doubtless come later, when she was strong enough to enjoy it. Rumours of her beauty and of Gaunt's devotion were rife. When he drove into the market town he found people cordial after a wholly new fashion.

Meanwhile, he himself was changing to an extent of which he was far from being aware. The heart and head which for so many years had been wholly occupied with self, were now filled exclusively with the image of another. As the days passed, and he held rigidly to his promise to Dr. Dymock, his thoughts were more and more completely given up to the question of Virginia's future health and happiness. Some deep-lying shyness had prevented his admitting to the doctor that, except for the ceremony, she was not as yet his wife. Yet he had this fact in reserve, as perhaps his only chance to restore to her her freedom.

He recognised that, as soon as she was strong enough, he and she must come to an understanding. He must show her his change of heart, and if it could be done, he must give her liberty. She would have to know that he was no longer her jailer, but her devotee.

He could see now how for all these years he had been yielding himself prisoner to the devil, and how his apprenticeship had culminated in the perpetration of a devilish deed. Night and day he was haunted by the memory of Virginia sitting up, tearing his jewels from her fingers, wringing her bare hands and crying that she was not clean.

These new thoughts, of pity and regret and unavailing tenderness, began to touch the lines of his mouth, to alter the expression of his eyes. He no longer went about scowling. He was seeing the world through a new medium. It was terrible to be able to do nothing. Virginia's vehement repudiation of gifts from him left him helpless. He dare not even send up flowers in his own

name. He had to be content with seeking out the finest plants in the conservatory, the best blooms of the garden, and giving them to Grover. Carnations seemed to be in favour, and he sent to Derby for fine specimens. One day, in the innocence of her heart, Grover revealed the fact to the patient, who was inhaling with satisfaction the spicy perfume of some particularly fine ones. Virginia said nothing at the time, but about half an hour after remarked that her head ached, and she thought the flowers smelt too strong. She sent them downstairs and said she would have no more carnations.

Gaunt, when he found the whole array on the table in the hall, asked the reason, and was told that Mrs. Gaunt seemed to have turned against them. Intent upon knowing the worst, he said: "Oh, you should have told her that I sent for them expressly."

"Just what I did tell her, sir," replied Grover at once.

He himself was startled by the pain this trifling fact caused him to feel. He went out of doors, and walked for hours, trying to escape from it. He found Hugh Caunter, and passed the rest of the day with him. The young agent, or bailiff, as the old-fashioned folk called him, was struck by the softening of his master's whole disposition. Anxiety and remorse did not make Gaunt irritable. He became quiet, with a hopeless kind of passive unhappiness which seemed to feel itself to be irremediable. Only now and then did he break out into sudden spasms of rage which, in the opinion of his household, were most excusable and infinitely preferable to his former continual surliness.

He was more approachable these days. Each morning he waited for the doctor and walked with him down the avenue, hearing the latest bulletin. When he came in, Grover usually contrived to be about, to pass on to him any details of interest.

"Better news from London this morning, sir. Yes, it has sent up Mrs. Gaunt's spirits something wonderful. Gave each of the little cats a new ribbon, she has. Yes, she has give them strange names, that she has. Cosmo and Damian, she calls 'em; and when I asked why such outlandish names, she laughs and says that they were doctors — great men, kind to the poor — and that she loves doctors, because they are going to make her little sister well. Fairly wrapped up in that little girl, she is, sir. I fear to think what the consequences would be if anything was to go wrong with the child. Has her photo there on the table beside her bed, with fresh flowers in front of it every day; and the boy, too — a handsome young gentleman, if you like! He will enjoy spending his holidays here, won't he, sir?"

Grover herself wondered how she dared to chatter in this way to him. The change must have been very marked. A month ago she had hardly opened her lips to him during her seven years' service in his house, except for the necessary conventional words she was obliged to speak. To-day, the silence in which he heard her had lacked any audible sign of encouragement. Yet it had encouraged. It had been the silence that eagerly awaits — that longs for more.

Cosmo and Damian! Surely the set lips under the heavy moustache were curving into an unwilling smile. How young it was — how freakish! How strangely he relished it! To have a creature like that always about him!

If he had only known! . . .

Definitely he had rendered his own happiness impossible. For his mind had begun to reach out, to curl itself about the idea of a new, strange happiness, subtle and flooding — happiness that must spring from this single-

minded, loving, exquisite child, whom he had imprisoned in his gloomy fortress.

He wandered aimlessly into his study, sat down at his writing table, rested his elbows upon it, his chin on his hands, and stared out upon the garden without moving for nearly an hour.

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Virginia's first visit to Perley Hatch gave her food for much reflection.

They motored there upon a fine sultry afternoon, and the chauffeur and his mistress made a "sedan chair" with their locked hands, to carry the invalid from the car across the grass to where a long chair had been spread for her in the shade.

Tom and Bill were produced from somewhere in the grounds, with more or less grimy faces and shabby overalls, but very healthy and vivacious manners. They quickly made friends with Mrs. Gaunt, divining a sympathetic spirit from the first. The baby, a damsel of about twelve months, being still largely in her nurse's hands, was cleaner and more amenable, but just as hilarious. The two boys were both frankly ugly, but the girl had taken after her somewhat showy father, and was a handsome child, of whom her mother was justly proud. She danced upon Virgie's lap, stroked her face, and tried earestly to feed her with the soppy remnants of a biscuit, which was her own idea of the greatest civility possible to offer.

Virgie, gifted with an innate understanding of babyhood, was delighted with these amenities. She enjoyed her visit thoroughly, and was startled when a stable clock struck six times.

"Six o'clock! Oh, Mrs. Ferris, it can't be!" cried she in consternation.

"Oh, I daresay that's a bit fast," replied Joey comfortably. "Anyhow, here comes Percy, so you must just wait five minutes and make friends with him."

Mr. Ferris, with every sign of animation and surprise, was advancing across the grass.

"Why, Jo, you never told me that you expected Mrs. Gaunt to tea! This is an unlooked-for pleasure!" He shook hands with effusion, and Virgie felt repugnance in every nerve. The man's voice, his manner, even his good looks, were obviously second-rate. He sat down and began to make himself agreeable — or so he thought — by talk of the emptiest, and glances of the most eloquent. Almost everything he said was a scarcely veiled compliment. Joey had risen, and was helping nurse to remove the family, which was not inclined to part from the new friend who knew so much about steam engines and the other prime interests of life. Ferris had ten minutes' talk with the new beauty, and flattered himself that he made the most of his opportunity.

His fawning turned Virgie almost sick. From her heart she pitied Joey. But that young person was apparently well satisfied with her lot, and quite impervious to the fact that her husband was a bounder. As soon as she came back to the tea-table, Virgie urgently said that she must go. The doctor would not approve of her being out so many hours, even though she had rested all the time, and been so happy and well amused. Then at once Ferris offered to carry her to the car, and hardly waited for permission before taking her up in his arms, and at once seizing the chance to whisper something to the effect that Gaunt was, in his opinion, more to be envied than any man under the sun.

"What, to have his wife fall ill when he had been two days married? I don't fancy he would agree with you," replied Mrs. Gaunt, in a voice so frigid that it pierced

even Ferris's hide and made him say to himself that he must put the brake on.

When he had deposited what he alluded to as his "fair burden" in her place, Virgie was almost ready to think that Gaunt's own arms were preferable. He, at least, took no unfair advantage of proximity. Joey took the steering wheel, and Ferris, after starting the engine for her, actually suggested that he should get in with Mrs. Gaunt. To her untold relief Joey declared that Mrs. Gaunt was an invalid, and already overtired. To her dismay, the man seemed inclined to persist, and the matter was finally settled by Joey's giving up the driver's seat to him, and herself getting into the tonneau with Virgie.

"He doesn't mean to bore people, but he certainly would have bored you all the way home with the story of his treasure cave," she remarked as they drove off.

"His treasure cave!"

"Yes. He thinks he has made a discovery. You know, part of our land includes the valley they call Branterdale. I expect Mr. Gaunt has told you that all this part of Derbyshire is limestone rock, and it is honeycombed with caves. We did not know we had any on our land, but the other day — that is, I should say, last season — when we were huntin', the fox ran across the river, and disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him. It was a narrow bit of the stream, between rocks, the bit that the guide-books tell you is like Dovedale in miniature. Of course, they all hunted and poked about, but they did not find so much as a rabbit-burrow. However, the thing worked in Percy's mind, and he went over afterwards on the quiet with the huntsman. This man, Gibbs, is a clever fellow, and he said the fox ran up the side of the rocky wall quite a long way; he saw the waving of the briers as he ran, and that the seekers had looked much too low down.

"So Percy let him down on a rope from the top — it's a sort of little cliff, you know, too steep for a man to climb just there — and they found the cave mouth under a great growth of blackberry bushes and fern."

"Oh, how exciting!"

"Yes, it was. The entrance was so small, they had to chip the rock to make it big enough for them to crawl in, and it was narrow when they got inside — like a mere slit in the ground, but soon it widened out, and then there came a low tunnel, and it went downwards, and after that they came out into a huge cave, with pillars of stalactite."

"It must have made quite an excitement."

"It was a bally nuisance," was Joey's elegant response. "The papers got hold of it, and before you could say 'knife' all the geologists in the kingdom wanted to come hunting for bones. Well, you see, we had to let them in, we couldn't very well keep them out. They grubbed and grubbed, but they didn't get much, because they say at no time could the entrance have been big enough to admit a large animal. Percy went with them, and watched them when they grubbed, to make sure that they didn't take anything away without leave, or keep any finds dark. And one day he found something that they were not looking for."

"Oh! What was that?"

"A pocket of lead. Quite a big one. You know, this county used to be mined for lead. The Speedwell cavern was really a mine at first. So he said nothing to anybody, but he got hold of an expert, who thought it quite promising; and now he wants to find people to subscribe capital, and work the lead. Wouldn't it be splendid if he found some?"

"It would indeed."

"You see, the land has belonged to my forefathers ever since the fourteenth century," said Joey. "Nobody has

touched it; that bit of the river bank has never been used for anything. If we should strike it rich, it would not be so very surprising."

"You will have to come and see the cave as soon as you are well enough to walk, Mrs. Gaunt," said Ferris, turning round with a smile which he himself thought enough to melt the most stony-hearted beauty.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT COMES NEXT?

"But, ah! for a man to arise in me,
That the man I am may cease to be!"—TENNYSON.

JOEY was in her garden next morning, tying up dahlias, whose heads, heavy with bloom, were beginning to droop, when she caught sight of the doctor crossing the lawn.

"Hallo!" she said cheerfully, pushing back her untidy hair from her red, hot face. "How are you? Been to Omberleigh? Does she want to change the time of her drive?"

"She sent no message," he replied, when he had shaken hands. "I have come to see you 'on my own,' as I expect you would put it. I want to say something to you."

"Cough it up," said Joey, speaking lightly enough, but with a change of expression — a dawning of apprehension in her little, unexpressive eyes, which the doctor knew and was always sorry to see.

"Nothing serious," he told her in a hurry. "Don't jump so to conclusions, Joey. This is merely medical orders. You must keep Ferris away when you are in charge of Mrs. Gaunt, please."

Joey stooped over the garden bed to pick up her hank of bass and bundle of sticks. When she arose, her face was even redder. "Well," she said, "it isn't easy to tell Percy to keep out of his own car."

The doctor looked at her with eyes of friendly pity and sympathy. He had known her from childhood, and had brought her three children into the world. He saw more

of the workings of the household at Perley Hatch than anybody else in the neighbourhood.

"I know it isn't," he answered, "but if it can't be done, say so, and Mrs. Gaunt must give up her tours with you. I may say that I suggested them at first not for her sake only. I thought a friend of your own sex, within reach, would be such a happy chance for you."

Joey had turned and strolled at his side towards a garden seat. They sat down, she with her habitual inelegance, her legs wide apart, her thick garden boots firmly planted on the gravel.

"I like her," she burst out with energy. "I like her to rights. She's got no nonsense about her; you should have seen her with the kiddies yesterday! I should hate to lose her! But what harm can poor old Percy do her? Of course he's in love with her, but so he is with every pretty woman he sees. And it is such a good thing"—she broke off here, her thick mouth quivering. The doctor in his compassion understood as well as if she had finished the sentence. The thought in her mind was —"it is such a good thing for him to be interested in a woman of our own class, where no harm can come of it, rather than in the daughter of the publican in Buxton, in whose bar he has spent half the day for the past month."

"Mrs. Gaunt is quite an invalid, Joey," Dymock told her gently. "It disturbs her to be introduced to strangers. Her own husband is behaving like a trump, and you must see quite well that I'm not going to let your husband step in and spoil things. She has got to be kept perfectly quiet, and if you can do that you may be with her. If not — if you can't guarantee to keep off Ferris — why the motor drives must stop. Gaunt is getting a car for her, but there will be some delay."

Joey sat still, saying nothing, gazing straight before her for a while, and Dymock waited with perfect patience.

"I thought," she began slowly, "when Gaunt got married, what a difference it might make to me supposing she was somebody I could cotton to. If he was more approachable, not such a disagreeable chap, Percy would have somewhere to go — somebody to speak to about his cave and his mining scheme. You know all Percy wants is something to do, something to fill up his mind. Old Percy's all right, isn't he, doctor? Only he gets bored. He's awfully struck with Mrs. Gaunt; and, you see, like everybody else, I have tried to grind my own axe instead of thinking only about her."

"Joey, you're a trump," replied the doctor heartily. "I see your point of view, and there's nothing against it, except that you must wait a few days — say a few weeks — before starting in. You may tell Percy that he must lie low or he will spoil his own chance with Gaunt. If that gentleman heard that he had been trying to make the running with madame, he would send the lead-mine to blazes. Can you get that into Ferris's head?"

"Yes," she replied more hopefully, "I think I could. He must hold off a bit for the present. I can say you said so — shove it all on you, can't I, doctor?"

"Most certainly. Doctor's orders. Ferris is, of course, quite free to say that he can't spare his car for Mrs. Gaunt. But if he lends it, he must for the present stand out. I hope you can manage this, young woman, because I think it much better for Mrs. Gaunt to have your society than to go out quite alone. If you can arrange as I tell you, I will do my little best to say a word to Gaunt about the Branterdale mine. His support would be the making of the scheme; for whatever his failings as a society man, nobody is more universally trusted and respected than he."

"I know. I am pretty sure I can keep Percy off, at least for a bit," Joey assured him. "As soon as she is

better, Mrs. Gaunt will like to have him about, he is such a taking chap, isn't he?"

"Handsome as paint," replied the doctor, smiling somewhat awry under his moustache. He could not tell her that the style which was fatal to the Buxton barmaid inspired in Virginia only an impatient disgust. "By the bye, I needn't give you the hint to tell Mrs. Gaunt nothing of my visit? She must not know that I have said a word? To put it shortly, you mustn't apologise; don't say a word about Ferris, good or bad. Simply arrange that he doesn't appear again."

She promised. They strolled together to the gate, where his horse waited, and parted with cordiality. Poor old Joey!

. . . . . .

In ten days, Virginia was allowed to put her feet to the ground; and the following day, which was Sunday, she elected to go to church. Dr. Dymock told her that it would do her good, but that, if she went, she must put up with her husband's company during service. It would be humiliating him too deeply to ask him to allow her to appear for the first time in public without him. Somewhat eloquently, the doctor put before her the conduct of Gaunt — his wonderful self-denial. She listened with drooped lids, and said nothing. In her heart she wondered what the speaker would say if she were to look up and say straight out: "He does not love me; he hates me. He is waiting for me to be well in order that he may persecute me."

No doubt he would call it hysterical raving.

When he was gone, she fell to her usual occupation of wondering what form Gaunt's cruelty was likely to take, when she should be strong enough to submit to it. She dared only look forward to the immediate future. If she tried to go beyond, to face the prospect of a whole life-

time of captivity, under the gaolership of this extraordinary man, she found her brain reeling. There was a subject which preoccupied her mind at this time; otherwise her speculations might have travelled farther. The question of Pansy's cure was the one thing of which she thought, night and day. The accounts which she regularly received were cheerful, but not what she had hoped. They were vague — disappointing. "The doctor thought, with patience, they would see some real improvement." Some improvement! When she hoped for a complete cure. "There was distinctly less temperature during the past twenty-four hours." But why was there temperature at all? Was the new treatment setting up a temperature? She knew enough of nursing and sickness to understand that these reports were by no means wholly satisfactory.

And now that Pansy was too ill to write herself, what a blank there was! Mamma was so different! She could not tell the things one wanted to know. Day by day, since Gaunt gave her money, Virgie had sent parcels to the nursing home, wherein her treasure was incarcerated. Fruit, jelly, pictures, flowers, books — anything love could suggest. Yet she hardly knew whether they were received, or, if so, whether they gave pleasure.

This dearth of what she called "real news" gave her a good deal of anxiety, though Grover usually contrived to reassure her, and to hold up a glorious picture of what the dear little lady would say when she was allowed to write herself!

On Sunday morning Virginia was up and dressed by church time; and walked downstairs, and along the hall, into the waiting carriage and pair. Gaunt was nowhere to be seen, and she drove to Monton, the village in whose scattered parish Omberleigh stood, escorted only by Grover.

At the church door, her husband was awaiting her, hav-

ing apparently traversed the two miles on foot. He timed his appearance to coincide with hers, so that it would look as if they had arrived together. It was almost a fortnight since she had set eyes upon him, and the sight of him brought a rush of scarlet to her cheeks, and a trembling to her limbs. He tried to look as if everything was normal, as if he had driven over with her, after breakfasting together as usual. He seemed paler than her memory of him, but displayed no emotion of any kind.

Virginia was looking unusually pretty. Grover, when she had finally adjusted the picturesque hat, had remarked that it was not often they had anything like *that* to look at in Manton church of a Sunday morning.

Certainly the lately married pair were the cynosure of every eye as they took their places in the old oak seat appropriated to Omberleigh. Gaunt had no time to feel self-conscious, so anxious was he as to how his wife would stand the ordeal of sitting beside him for so long. He tried, however, not to increase her nervousness by seeming aware of it. He appeared immersed in his prayer-book and hymnal, singing the tenor part in the hymns very correctly.

The service was extremely simple, and not lengthy. Virginia got through it quite well, feeling, after the first ten minutes, a sense of relief and peace for which she could not account. She told herself that it was the grace of God, and that, if she could sit so calmly at her captor's side, without a tremor, it showed that strength would be given her to endure his uttermost unkindness patiently.

He stepped out of the seat, at the end of service, and waited for her to follow, quite quietly and not officiously. His manner was, indeed, so natural that only a keen observer would have suspected that naturalness to be assumed. At her side he walked down the broad central passage, and out at the south porch.

He had held all his neighbours so rigorously at bay for years past that very few had ventured to await the appearance of the bridal couple. But one elderly lady, of shapeless bulk, with her bonnet askew, waiting beside a big motor, escorted by a large and fine old gentleman, stepped forward.

"Well, Osbert Gaunt, you must allow me to shake hands, and to ask you to make me known to your lovely young wife," said she kindly.

Gaunt did not look pleased, but he made the necessary introduction. The old pair were Lord and Lady St. Aukmund. "I hope you will come and see my wife before long, when we are a bit more settled down!" he volunteered.

"My dear boy, I should think this is the best day's work you ever did in all your life!" cried the old countess, holding Virgie's hand most cordially. "And she is Bernard Mynors's daughter! Oh, yes, my dear, all the county knows who you were! All the county is talking about you! But nobody will be surprised at the miracle when they see you! As to him, he is the most savage, the most *farouche* creature that ever was made — or was until he saw you — for you have altered him already, my dear! I knew him when he was a little mite in velvet suits, and I never thought he would turn out as he did! But you have come to the rescue just in time. Put ceremony on one side, and bring him to dine with us at the Chase just *en famille* one day this week, won't you?"

Gaunt was obliged to explain that his wife was a convalescent, and that any evening engagement was at present out of the question for her. He hoped that it would soon be different. Lady St. Aukmund showed herself pertinacious, and asked more questions than he liked, but he managed to parry them all, and she got into her motor at last, all compliments and desires for showing hospitality.

He waited until the great folks were off, and then put Virgie into the carriage at once.

As he arranged the dust rug carefully about her feet, Virginia was struck for the first time with a sort of compunction. Her husband, for whatever motive, was certainly carrying out the doctor's orders loyally. She was touched with shame that he must walk home, because she was occupying his carriage. Leaning forward impetuously, she said: "I hope you will drive home? I hope you will not walk because of — me?"

"Thanks, I prefer it."

He stepped back, gave the order, and she was driven away. He stood there in the road, his brows knit, his heart in tumult. What an ass he had been to decline that offer! He might have been seated by her now, conscious of her in every fibre, seeing her, even though not daring to look at her, breathing her, as it were, into his being. It could have done her no harm. He might have found time for some word, some faltering sentence that should have prepared her for his change of mind, for his entire defeat and penitence.

He started to walk home, in the dust of her chariot wheels. He would set eyes upon her no more that day, unless he stood, as he often did, at the window of his study, whence he could see the canopy of her chair as she lay out upon the terrace.

. . . . . .

He saw her no more, except from a distance, for another week. Then the doctor gave him cheering news. She was doing splendidly. He thought she might lead a normal life in a few days more, if she were carefully guarded, and not allowed to overdo herself.

"You might take her to the coast? — Devon or Cornwall, perhaps?" he suggested.

Gaunt said he would consider it. It was a difficult time for him to leave home, just as harvest was beginning. A month later perhaps.

As he limped back, up the avenue, when Dymock had ridden away, he thought that perhaps it might make the rupture easier, if it took place elsewhere, and not at Omberleigh, where apparently the world and his wife — specially his wife — was busy with his affairs. The world and his wife had been so shut out from his own purview hitherto that he was wholly unprepared for the shock of surprise, amusement, interest, which his sudden marriage excited. In such a sparsely populated neighbourhood he had believed that he might do what he pleased without exciting comment. He saw now, with sudden clarity, how impossible such an existence as he had planned for his unlucky wife would have been in reality.

A woman so used — any woman in the world except Virginia — would have cried her wrongs from the housetops. His persecution of her could not have been hid for long. He felt that he was looking out upon a new world, of whose existence he had been as unaware as the proverbial ostrich. His vindictive malice even had its ridiculous side. He had made an egregious fool of himself.

Heavy as lead was his heart as he entered the house.

Cosmo and Damian, with their coloured ribbons about their fluffy necks, were at play in the hall, dancing about at hide and seek behind the big chairs, while Grim, his own golden collie, sat upon a settle, her feet tucked up like a fashionable lady afraid of a mouse, uttering panting, whining protests against the reckless interlopers. Gaunt called her, and she came down slowly and with quite evident nervousness from her elevation. Cosmo hunched his lovely grey fluffy back into an arch, and spat. His tail became a bottle brush. Grim slunk apologetically by, her tail between her legs.

"Poor old girl," said Gaunt, as he went into the dining-room to lunch. "You and I are a bit superfluous in this house now, it seems."

He went out that afternoon with the object of meeting Caunter some distance away at a house whose tenant had asked for a new thatch. For the first time in his life he forgot what he had come out for, and wandered by himself until past six o'clock, his whole mind focused upon his domestic affairs, wondering whether any readjustment were possible, and if so, how he should set about it.

Entering the house once more, he suddenly remembered his neglected appointment, and told himself that he would go round to Caunter's house after dinner and apologise. Slowly and heavily he went upstairs, and into his room to change. In the midst of his toilet sounds came to him, low and muffled, from the next room. At first he hardly noticed; then he crept close to the door, and listened. What he heard gave him a curious sensation of heat, of hurry, of desperate sympathy, and extraordinary vexation.

His wife was in trouble. He could hear her. The sound of sobbing, the pitiful broken gasps of quite uncontrollable weeping came to him, mingled with the tones, coaxing and low, with which Grover was apparently attempting consolation. What had happened? Had she hurt herself? Had they allowed her to run into any danger? But no! He was at once aware, though how he knew it he could hardly say, that no pain of her own would draw those wild tears, that unrestrained grief from Virginia.

Whatever it was, it must be stopped, or he should go mad. He felt as if his head were on fire — as if he must go out and kill somebody — why was it allowed, that she should be made unhappy? Then he thought of himself — of his own diabolical cruelty! Could she be lamenting because she was slowly but inexorably growing better, be-

cause she was to be taken from the doctor's kind hands and surrendered once more to her husband's harsh ones?

The sweat stood upon the forehead of Gaunt of Omberleigh. It seemed to him that never — even in his hot youth — even in the first days of his jilting — had he suffered such torment as this. He rushed from his room into the passage, and called aloud to Grover:

"Come here — come out — I want to speak to you!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FINAL TEST

— "I slew
Myself in that instant! a ruffian lies
Somewhere. Your slave, see, born in his place."
— BROWNING.

IN the closed room within there was a pause. The sound of weeping died away, as though the master's voice had forced even anguish into the silence of terror. Grover answered him at length in sudden haste, as though anything would be better than to risk his anger. There followed a muttering and murmuring, as though the maid were imploring her mistress to command herself. Gaunt shook with rage and helplessness.

Thereafter the door was softly opened, elaborately closed, and Grover, her own eyes suspiciously red, emerged and stood before him. For one moment he hoped he might have been mistaken. "Was it you making that noise?" he asked thickly; and as she hesitated, he added in haste:

"Give me the truth, please, Grover."

Perhaps something in his voice excited the woman's pity. At any rate, she rejected the way out which his random words had suggested. It had been on her tongue to say yes, it was she — she had conjured up toothache, a fall downstairs, a family bereavement, wondering which would sound the most convincing, and was forced to reject all.

"It was Mrs. Gaunt," she faltered baldly.

"Well, what's the matter? Out with it. What makes her cry like that — eh?"

"She's had bad noos, sir. Noos of her little sister. She's fair broken-hearted — it's awful to see her ——" The kind soul's voice failed, and she applied her handkerchief to her quivering mouth.

"Good heavens! The child's not dead, is she?"

"No, sir; but she's in agony, and calling for her sister. They seem to think she can't live, sir — the treatment has made her worse ——"

"Mrs. Gaunt's not strong enough to go to London," he broke in, for the first miserable instant conscious only that he could not part with her.

"No, sir. She said you'd say so — that's what she's crying about," replied Grover, fairly breaking down, and turning away.

The man's face was white. "Stay where you are — wait — I am going in to see her," he muttered. Grover made a movement, but shrank back again. It was not for her to interfere with what her master chose to do.

The opening door brought Virginia to attention. She had been lying face downward upon the sofa, which stood near the fire they always lit in the evening. With a bound she was on her feet, and when she saw him she gave a gasp of terrified surprise; then, with extraordinary swiftness, her mood changed.

"It is you, is it?" she said in a voice that was hardly audible, so husky was it with violent weeping. "Come and look! Come and see what you have done. Oh, indeed you have got your wish! You have made me suffer. Never in all your life can you have had to endure anything like the torment — I say the torment — that I am undergoing now!" She stood before him, defiant, tense with the force of the feeling in her, wringing her little weak hands, clenching them over her labouring breast.

"Oh, why didn't I go on, why didn't I stay there at my post — working, starving, loving them, till I dropped? If she had to die, she could at least have had me with her. I could have been sure that all was done that could be done. She wouldn't have had to die crying for a sister that never came. Oh!" she burst out with a final effort of uncontrollable emotion, all the more distressing because it could but just be heard, "why was I ever born to know such agony as this? I thought God would let me bear it all — not her — not that little thing! Oh, Pansy, Pansy, *Pansy!*"

She dropped again upon her sofa — her face hidden in the cushions, trying to stifle the tearing sobs. Her husband made a gesture of despair. He came near. He would have knelt beside her, but he dared not. He was so overwhelmed with what he was feeling, and the impossibility of expressing any of it, that for a moment he was choked and could not speak. When he did, the curb he was using made his voice sullen and without expression.

"Virginia, I am sorry. Let me help you. Please show me your letter, or tell me what is in it."

Something unwonted — something she did not expect — must have spoken in his repressed voice. She sat up, wiping away the blinding tears, and tried to speak to him, but failed for weeping. At last, feeling that her voice could not be controlled, she drew out a letter from the front of her frock and held it to him.

He took it, warm from its late contact with her; and the thought made him for a moment dizzy, so that words and lines swam before his eyes. He read it through.

There was silence. When he had got to the end, he raised his heavy lids and looked at her. Her face was now set, almost fierce. The dove-like sweetness of her changeful eyes was gone. They showed like a stormy sea.

"You want to go?" he almost whispered.

She laughed bitterly. That she, Virginia the martyr, could laugh like that! He reeled mentally with this fresh surprise of womanhood.

"*Want to go?* I *am* going," she said deliberately, her huskiness giving almost the effect of hissing. "I have borne enough. Now I don't care what happens. I am going to Pansy. If you try to prevent me, I will scream and rouse the house. I will call upon your butler to protect me; I will say you are mad, as I believe you are! But somehow I will go to her. Then, afterwards, when I come back, you may do as you like. You may cut me to pieces with a knife, and I won't complain! But now I am rebel! Now you can't keep me! I am not afraid of you any more!"

There were a thousand things to say, each more hopeless, each more futile than the other. He could not say them. In profound humiliation he took what she gave him, he accepted it all. A long moment ticked past after her passionate challenge. Then he spoke humbly.

"Virginia — would it console you to go — to-night?"

She staggered on her feet as if his words overthrew her; then again she laughed in derision. "To-night? Ah, but, of course, you are mocking!"

"As God hears me, I am not. There is an express which stops at Derby at nine o'clock. You have an hour in which to pack and eat some dinner. Grover must go with you — you will want her when you get to London. I will call her now." He spoke with his watch in his hand.

Virgie caught her breath. She looked at him uncertainly. . . .

Once, as a small child, during a visit to London, her father had taken her with him upon a visit to the Law Courts. They had been in court when sentence was passed upon a prisoner. She had completely forgotten the crime and what its punishment was to be; but as she looked at

her husband, she recalled the expression of the prisoner in the dock, whose doom had just been pronounced.

"For the first time — I thank you," she muttered chokingly.

Gaunt went to the door. With his hand upon the handle, he turned back. "Promise me that you will now control yourself," he said frigidly. "No more wild weeping. You have cried yourself hoarse."

"I promise," she said in answer, her eyes upon him, her thoughts already far away in the nursing home with Pansy.

He went out, and she heard him speaking to Grover in the passage.

. . . . . .

An hour later, having forced herself to eat something, and having accomplished her packing, she came down into the hall, equipped for her journey.

The new motor, which had arrived only two days before, stood at the door in charge of a chauffeur, who was to stay a month and train Ransom, the coachman, to drive.

Gaunt awaited her in the hall, his hat in his hand. Her face changed.

"Don't be alarmed," he told her, coming near and speaking so low that only she could hear. "I am coming to Derby only. There are things I must tell you, and there was no time before starting. We shall only just do it. Jump in."

She obeyed. He briefly directed Grover to sit by the chauffeur, and they were off.

For a few minutes they sat in silence. The car slipped down the avenue, the lamplight dancing upon the pine-trunks, and came out into the open road, where it crossed the moor, and the day had not wholly faded from the sky. Then Gaunt spoke.

"Does your travelling-bag lock? Have you a key?"

"Yes."

"Then take these notes." He told her what sum he had given her, opened the packet and made her verify it. She obeyed almost mechanically.

"Now," he went on, "when you get to London, drive straight to the Langham Hotel. I have written it down for you on this paper. Give my name, and they will see that you have a comfortable room, with one for Grover close by. In the morning, as soon as you are rested, telephone to Dr. Danby at this address in Cavendish Square. Let me make a confession, Virginia. He is the man I ought to have called in at first. When I knew him he was a young chap just through his hospital training, who came down here one summer as *locum tenens*. It was the year of my own accident. I owe it to that man that I did not lose my leg. Now he is a great specialist, at the top of his profession. When we were arranging about your little sister, I would have mentioned him to you; but I found you full of the idea of this new treatment, and I own that I cared so little for the child, or what became of her, that I thought it best you should have your own way. But if there is any hope for her, Danby is your man. If you believe this, do as I say. Override etiquette; take him straight to see Pansy. If there should be any difficulty, refer every one to me; but Danby can advise you how best to proceed; you are safe with him. You will probably have to move the patient, if she is strong enough to stand it. Danby's nursing homes are to be trusted. Take her where he tells you. I think you have your cheque-book, have you not? You can write a cheque for any fees that are necessary. I will pay in money to the bank to meet your demand. Then you can stay at your hotel, and be with your little sister as much as is practicable. Are you taking in what I say?"

"Yes, I am. I — I — don't know what to answer. Thank you. You are being — so — unlike yourself. I

feel bewildered. I am sorry I was so rude to you just now, upstairs, and said such things ——"

The meek, hoarse voice was so pitiful that he felt tears start to his eyes. "That's all right," he muttered hurriedly. "One thing you have to promise me. You will take care of your own health. Remember, you owe it to me to." He broke off. What did she owe to him but misery? However, she accepted the situation with a simplicity which was to him frankly awful.

"I know. I will try to do what I think you would wish. I realise that I have caused trouble and — and expense, already. It is generous of you to let me go like this. Please tell me, how long may I stay?"

"Virginia!" he said, and dropped his forehead on his hands. She looked at him in dim surprise, but with a mind too full of her own trouble to conceive of his.

"How long?" she persisted gently. "A week?"

"How can I decide how long?" he asked, lifting his haggard face again. "It depends upon the child. I must leave it to you. Stay as long as she needs you. I can say no more than that."

"Oh!" she murmured, "you are so good!"

He made no sound, but his lips set themselves in a line of pain. Ah, if only his brutality, his savage treatment of her did not lie between them! If it had been simply that she had come to him without love, yet longing for tenderness and protection! This would have been the moment to take her in his arms, to enfold her with sympathy and devotion that asked as yet no recompense.

She leaned back in her corner, while the car rushed easily through the country, and the yellow harvest moon came up to show him more clearly the glimmering pearly oval that was her face. She was pondering over his directions, and every now and then put some little question which showed how practical was her mind, how bent upon

the enterprise which lay before her. At last, after a prolonged silence, she spoke unexpected words.

"I believe that being so miserable makes me understand a little bit better; understand you, I mean. When I think of my Pansy, I could find it in my heart to kill that wicked woman, her nurse, who let her be hurt when she was a little helpless child. I could almost torture this doctor, who has made her worse when he claimed to make her better; and I seem to see how it has happened — how being miserable for so many years has made you want to hurt somebody. . . . But the dreadful thought is, that it would do no good — no good at all! If I could kill the wicked nurse and the unskilful doctor it would not make my darling one bit better! And to make me unhappy won't help you, either, even though you think it will! I can't give you back the unhappy years, the lost years! It is all no good — no good!"

"Virginia — don't!" So much was forced out of him in his pain. He could have told her that in one respect she was wrong — that it *was* in her power to restore to him the years that the locust had eaten — that he was at her feet, conquered, submissive.

But he saw how small a fragment of her mind was really occupied with him. She was eagerly looking forward — searching the horizon for the first glimpse of the chimneys of Derby.

He mattered very little to her now.

. . . . . .

They reached the station with six minutes in hand. Gaunt had sent a man down to Monton to telegraph for a sleeping-carriage, and they found all awaiting them.

Grover and she were duly installed in their luxurious quarters, the guard had been liberally feed to look after them. Gaunt repeated some of his directions, and ascertained that both she and Grover thoroughly understood

them. He took the maid aside for a moment, into the corridor of the train, while he expressed to her, in a few terse, pointed words, how unremitting must be her care, how keen her attention. Grover's response was reassuring, if embarrassing.

"There, sir, I love her almost as well as you do yourself," she had said. The words stuck for long days afterwards in the man's head. Until he heard it put thus bluntly, he had hardly known that the keen emotion which he experienced could be called by so divine a name as love.

It had, then, befallen him to love a second time, with a force which made his first love seem crude and weak — mere counterfeit.

His impressions of the few final seconds were blurred. The guard went along the train, closing doors. Gaunt was shut out, upon the platform. Anxious to show her gratitude, Virgie stood by the open window of her compartment, looking at him, trying to fix her mind upon him, but with a fancy filled with far other visions. The image of her little sister's face, the sound of her cries, was in her heart. She was picturing her own appeal to this new doctor, this deliverer who had been brought to her by no other hands than those of her husband. She looked down upon his hand, clenched upon the sill of the door.

"Put up the window when the train starts," he was saying. "I am defying the doctor in letting you go like this, upon my own responsibility. You must justify me by taking all the care of yourself that is possible. Remember, you have Grover to wait upon you, and you are to order anything and everything you want. There is no necessity for you to do anything but just sit with the child when she is well enough to wish it."

Her face lit up gloriously. She smiled softly, pityingly, at the man who could imagine a moment in which Pansy would not wish to have Virgie with her.

A whistle sounded. He started and winced. Then, gripping the door a moment, he leaned forward, his eyes burning in his head. "Remember," he blurted out, "you are on your honour — on your honour to come back to me. You have undertaken to return."

She stared at him in surprise as she stood a little back from the window. The train began to move. "Of course I am coming back," she said in astonishment. "You know I shall." For a moment she just smiled, but in bitterness. "I am released on parole," she said; "I quite understand."

For a few moments after the smoothly running express had slithered out of the station, off upon her way south, Virginia was held by the memory of the look upon Gaunt's face as she passed from his sight. It was puzzling. He behaved almost as if he meant to be kind; which was incredible. His face seemed to her to be altering, or to have altered, since she first saw it.

Anyhow, he had let her go. Her mad outburst had borne fruit — her revolt had been entirely successful. She was off, without him, going to London, going to Pansy. Her return to bondage lay in the future, dim and misty, not worth troubling about as yet. There were other far weightier matters to occupy her. Before they had traversed ten miles she had forgotten Gaunt, almost as though he did not exist.

He, poor wretch, having made his sacrifice, stood a moment with arms tightly folded, wishing he had not been so altruistic. His eyes followed the train till it disappeared, then he turned, and went haltingly out of the station, back to the empty motor. He muttered something to himself as he opened the door. "We shall see."

"Did you speak, sir?" said the chauffeur.

"No, no! I didn't say anything. Home, of course."

"Yes, sir."

The Silent Knight sped on, and was engulfed in the darkness, now completely fallen.

Gaunt of Omberleigh sat down in the place which his wife had lately occupied. His body was there in the motor; his heart, his mind, all that was in him, was following her upon her journey. He leaned forward, gazing upon nothing, while in his fancy he recalled the whole of the late scene between them. Could he have done anything more? Could he have let her see? . . . But no. To do that — to utter any plea — would have deprived him of a wonderful opportunity. It was now in his power to prove her to the uttermost.

He had let her go. She had plenty of money, and still more credit. She was going to her own people, to her selfish, worldly mother, to her little sister's love and devotion. It was not to be supposed that, once back in their midst, she could refrain from telling her family some part at least of what she had been made to suffer. Doubtless it would all be poured out. Every kind of influence would then be brought to bear upon her in order to shake her allegiance. It would be pointed out to her that he was probably mad, a person whose morbid tendencies must not be encouraged. She would be told that it was her duty not to return to him. A hundred arguments were ready to hand.

As he faced the situation, he suddenly felt that it was too hard a test which he had set her. Brave she was; single-minded he had found her; honest she seemed, but if, in face of argument, in face of influence, in face of love, in spite of fear, in spite of dreadful apprehension of punishment, she returned to what she still believed to be a state of slavery and subjection, of captivity and surveillance, then, indeed, she was a paragon, a pearl of such price as he was not worthy to possess.

It was too much to hope for! She was gone, and she

would never return. The scandal and the tragedy of his marriage would be in every one's mouth in a very few weeks' time.

He had let her go.

Why?

Because it was not in his power to hold her. Even if he had followed a certain wild, hateful impulse which bade him keep her, even by means of locked doors and imprisonment, he would have held but the husk of her. The lovely spirit which animated her, which was the thing he loved, and met for the first time, would not have been there in her prison, but away with the child she loved. His success would have been sheer failure.

Whereas now, deep in his heart, not to be completely annihilated, lurked the faint hope that his present failure might possibly, by some scarcely conceivable good fortune, turn into success.

The miles flew past unnoticed, while he sat rapt within himself. As the car came to a standstill before the dark porch of Omberleigh, he was reflecting upon the strangeness of the fact that he had once thought Virginia's resemblance to her mother so striking.

Already she had almost ceased to remind him of his former bitterness. A wholly new image of her had grown up in his heart. Before it for the last weeks he had been burning incense. He had placed it in a sacred niche upon a pedestal.

To-night he had taken it out. He wanted to hold it in his arms, to make it his.

What if it failed to pass the almost superhuman test which he had devised for it?

CHAPTER XIX

ABSENCE

"My whole life is so strange: as strange
It is, my husband, whom I have not wronged,
Should hate and harm me."— THE RING AND THE BOOK.

As once before, when the doctor visited her, Joey Ferris was busy in the garden, cutting off dead blooms. Her little boys busily waited on her, each with his small barrow, in which they collected the faded flowers which she tossed upon the path, and ran off with them down the long walks to the rubbish heap, puffing and blowing to announce the fact of their being goods trains or expresses, or light engines, as the fancy took them.

It was nearly lunch time, and Ferris was going to bring home a man who had showed signs of interest in the lead-mine scheme. As the stable clock chimed a quarter to one, the mistress of Perley Hatch straightened her back, took off her gardening gloves, rubbed her nose reflectively, and wondered whether she "ought to change."

As the doubt crossed her mind, she looked up to see some one approaching across the grass, and with a vast surprise recognised Gaunt of Omberleigh.

"Why," cried she very heartily, advancing to meet him with hand outstretched, "I *am* glad to see you! Didn't think you knew your way to this house! What's the news this morning? Better, I hope?"

"It seems to be astonishingly good. The change of treatment and my wife's presence, taken together, have

worked a miracle. The child, who was dangerously ill, is making marked progress every day."

"Oh, well, that is some consolation for you, isn't it?" said Joey, her eyes full of sympathy, and her voice almost tender. "I think you are just the most unselfish man I have ever heard of — letting Virgie go off like that!"

"Please, Mrs. Ferris ——"

"It's no use please-Mrs.-Ferrising me! Some men in your place would have said things! First she herself falls ill, and then, just as your love and care has brought her round, off she goes and leaves you on the All-alone Stone! Percy has been on the point of riding over to try and persuade you to come to us for a bit of dinner, but he has been so taken up over his mine."

"You are more than kind, Mrs. Ferris. I fear I've been a most unneighbourly neighbour for many years. Now I am going to turn over a new leaf. As a preliminary, will you give me some lunch to-day? I want to talk to Ferris about his mine. Dr. Dymock was telling me something of it."

Joey was overjoyed. "Need you ask?" she joyfully inquired. "Come to the house and wash your hands, while I tell Daniel to take your horse round. I conclude you rode over?" She fixed her guest with her shrewd, twinkling glance, and thought that he had done something to himself, she hardly knew what. Was it that he wore a new, very well-cut riding suit, with tan gaiters, and that his hair was trimmed more sprucely than usual? Or was he really younger, when you saw him close, than he appeared from a distance? Certainly he had altered in some subtle fashion, and for the better. He did not look well, though. There were black marks under his eyes, as if he had not slept.

Tom and Bill came rushing up at the moment, charging with their barrows. They were wholly untroubled with

shyness, and loudly announced that Tom was a Midland express from Glasgow, and Bill a pilot engine. Gaunt stopped and gravely shook hands with each, holding the plump, earthy moist little fingers curiously in his brown, muscular grip. Then he picked up Bill by his waist, and seated him upon his shoulder. "Now you're in the look-out — the signal-box," said he. "Is the line clear?"

This was enchanting. Bill shouted to Tom to go and be the excursion and seized Gaunt's hand, drawing back his arm to represent a lever.

"I'm off'ring the 4.10 to Manton box!" he cried.

"Fancy your playing with them," said Joey, deeply gratified. "That's what Virgie did. Bill, you remember the pretty lady who came to tea and told you about little Runt? This is her husband, that she belongs to."

"Oh, are you?" cried the excursion train, turning right round upon the permanent way in horrifying fashion. "Tell us about little Runt again — do!"

"I don't know that story, Bill. I'll have to get the pretty lady to tell it to me, then perhaps I can pass it on."

"Where is she?" cried Tom. "Have you got her here?"

"No, Tom. She has gone to be with her own little sister, who is ill. I dare say she tells her stories, to pass the time while she has to be in bed, flat on her back."

"Flat on her back? Beastly!" said Tom.

"Why's that for?" asked his brother.

"Because her back was hurt when she was quite a baby. She was thrown out of a motor-car, and has always been ill."

"You'd better not let our baby go in the car, mummy," cried the little brother promptly; and Gaunt felt a movement of affection for the child whose feeling spoke so readily.

They moved across the grass towards the house, and

suddenly Joey gave a pleased exclamation. "Here comes Percy!" said she brightly.

Ferris was advancing, accompanied by a young man who, though he wore a country suit, had the air of London about his hat and his boots. He was a distinguished-looking, tall fellow, and Gaunt, as he set Bill upon his feet upon the grass, knew that he had seen him before. As the stranger drew near their eyes met, and the same look of half-recognition appeared in both faces.

Ferris's cordial welcome to Gaunt was somewhat flamboyant. He wrung his hand a little too often and too vehemently. Then he introduced his friend, Mr. Rosenberg. That cleared up the mystery, as far as Gaunt was concerned. Instantly he saw the gallery flooded with summer sunshine, the glimmering floors, the mellow canvases, the figure of the beautiful girl, bending over the inscription at the foot of the marble cupid.

To Gerald Rosenberg memory had come without difficulty. The occasion when he first set eyes on Gaunt was a critical moment in his life — how critical he hardly knew at the time. The same picture was stamped upon his own brain: the picture of Virginia beginning to descend the staircase, and of his own turning of the head with a consciousness of being watched — of meeting face to face a pair of eyes, ironic, intent, challenging.

"This is our neighbour, Gaunt of Omberleigh," Ferris was jovially proclaiming. "Luckiest man in the county; just married the most lovely girl I ever saw in my life."

Gaunt! That was the name of Virginia's husband! She had said that her future home would be Derbyshire! Was this — this man — her husband? He grew quite pale.

"Was it you," he stammered, "*you* who married Miss Mynors?"

Gaunt assented. The eyes of the two men once more

met. "I saw you," slowly said Rosenberg, "at Hertford House, when I went there to meet my sister and her friend. You were in the Gallery."

"I was; and I saw Miss Mynors."

Gerald felt the blood rush to his head. "For the first time?"

Gaunt again assented mutely. He was filled with exultation. Unhappy and uncertain as he was, insecure as he knew his tenure of his prize, at least she was his at present, at least he might claim this one triumph.

"Fell in love at first sight, and no wonder!" cried Ferris, with enthusiasm. "Isn't he the luckiest chap on earth? I really don't think I have ever seen anybody quite as lovely as Mrs. Gaunt."

"You are right — that is the almost universal opinion. I congratulate Mr. Gaunt," said Gerald, rallying his composure.

How all the crises of our lives come upon us unaware! How little had he guessed, that day in the Gallery, that, although he had a good chance then, it was his last! His father, in persuading him to flee temptation, had urged the probability of a future recurrence of opportunity. "She won't run away," he had said. And behold! even as he spoke, the chain of gold was being forged to bind captive the innocent girl.

Gaunt was speaking to Joey. "Great as is Virginia's beauty," Gerald heard him say, "it is the least part of her charm. It is her character which is so fine, so exceptional. She is pure gold throughout."

Young Rosenberg looked at him with a lingering gaze of hatred. Had he known in what a crucible the gold of Virginia's nature had been and was still being proved, the hate would have intensified perhaps to the point of sending his fingers to the husband's throat. This man had apparently been certain, where he was doubtful. *Was*

Virginia as fair within as without? Could she have wholly escaped the taint of her mother's ignoble nature? His father had thought not. In his indecision he had let slip the treasure which another man had promptly gathered. As they walked slowly towards the house, his mind was filled with the two ideas — first, that all was over, so far as he was concerned, and, also, that in the course of the next few hours he might possibly see her whose dove's eyes had haunted him ever since that fatal day in the valley of decision — the day when he had decided upon retreat.

Then he began by degrees to grasp what the others were speaking of. He learned that the sudden and dangerous illness of Pansy had called Virginia to London, and that Gaunt had allowed her to go without him. Also he learned that she had suffered with a bad knee, and that her husband was anxious lest she should now be doing too much. He listened as in a dream, his mind slowly assimilating all these rapid happenings; and by degrees he realised that, if she were in London without Gaunt, he could easily see her, if he could ascertain her address.

The conversation soon turned to the projected lead-mine, in which Mr. Rosenberg senior had been asked by a friend in the financial world to take a director's place. The party were to meet Mr. Rosenberg's own expert, and Ferris's, at Branterdale cavern that afternoon. Joey was coming too.

She drove their guest over in the car, Percy electing to ride with Gaunt, whom he was most anxious to propitiate. On the way, it was quite easy for Gerald to ask Joey where in London Mrs. Gaunt was staying.

"Well, I don't exactly know," said Joey. "She went up to the Langham, but directly her mother found that out, she determined that she would go there, too. I fancy the mother's a bit of a sponge, isn't she? Anyway, Virgie

thought her husband wouldn't see keeping the two of them there, so she has gone into rooms with her mother, as being less expensive, and she always writes to me from the Nursing Home in Queen Anne Street."

"So she writes to you?"

"Yes. When they first married, Mr. Gaunt hadn't got a motor, so ours came in handy. I took her about a bit. She's a perfect angel. Hard on him, poor chap! having to let her go like this, isn't it? You can see how he is fretting!"

"Is he? He looks to me an ill-conditioned brute," said Gerald shortly.

"Oh, he's quite a good sort when you know him," replied Joey kindly.

"But as a husband for her ——"

"Well, why didn't you chip in?"

"One can't always follow the dictates of the heart, Mrs. Ferris. I couldn't afford to marry for love."

"Well, of course, Gaunt is much too old for her, as far as years go; but," observed Joey, with one of her flashes of intuition, "he is absurdly young in the sense of not having used up his emotions. He was jilted in his youth, so they say, and ever since has imagined that he hated women — thought himself heart-broken, and shut himself up alone until one fine day he saw her. He has all the heaped-up love of a lifetime to pour out at her feet."

"I don't doubt his sentiments. The question is, will she have any use for them?" retorted Gerald, with bitterness.

. . . . . .

It was late when Gaunt reached Omberleigh that evening. It seemed to him as though he had been away a week, for the reason that this was the day when he usually heard from Virgie, and if she wrote in her usual punctual

way, there would be a letter lying in the bag upon the hall table when he came in.

There was. He opened the bag with hands that shook so that he was afraid Hemming might notice; and when he drew out the letter, "he pounced on it, like a dog on a bone," as the servant afterwards related, "and was off with it into his study before you could count two."

The scrupulously business-like letters were little enough upon which to feed the fire of a consuming passion. The point was that in every letter she recognised, by implication, his hold over her. Before taking any step she consulted him, she awaited his permission. In a way it was torture; she never let him forget that he had bought and paid for her. On the other hand, since she maintained this attitude, surely she would come back to him!

She never used any form of address at the beginning of her letters. "Osbert Gaunt, Esq.," was written above, and then followed the body of the communication. She signed herself merely "Virginia," as though the second name were too horrible, or too distasteful to write. He had never seen her full signature since she became his wife. He hungered to see her written acknowledgment of her wifehood, and with this object he had set a trap for her. He wrote a cheque which would need her endorsement, and sent it to her. This expedient failed, for she returned the cheque, saying she was in no need of more money; she had enough, and more than enough.

Each of her letters contained a small statement of account, carefully balanced. The first he had received was the one that pleased him best. There was very much to tell. She had to relate her experiences — how she went first to see Pansy, and was horrified at the change in her; how she determined to act without delay, and informed the doctor over the telephone that she meant to have another opinion. He was not pleased, but was, as Dr. Danby

foretold, obliged to consent. The doctors met, and differed gravely; upon which she had formally placed herself and the case in Dr. Danby's hands. Pansy was moved that day, and from the first few hours showed symptoms of relief. Then had come the difficulty with her mother. This she had solved without applying to Gaunt. She had gone to her mother's rooms in Margaret Street, found that she and Grover could both be taken in, and had moved thither accordingly. Her exact explanations made him smile and grunt, and brought a moisture to his eyes.

To this letter there had been a postscript. Under her signature these words had been scrawled, as if on impulse:

Thank you — oh, thank you!

He had dwelt upon those words until he had half persuaded himself that she must have perceived something of his remorse, and wished to reassure him. The following letters from her had not, however, done anything to foster this idea. He longed to write and tell her to go back to the Langham, and take her mother there, to bid her choose herself a fur motor-coat, and anything else she liked, but he restrained all these impulses. He meant her to come back, if at all, as she had departed, in the full persuasion of his cruelty and harshness, to come back because her crystal honesty would not allow her to break her promise, even to him.

With this end in view, he forced himself to write to her as curtly as possible, signing himself "O. G." merely.

The missive he now held in his hand was no exception to his wife's usual style. He read it, first with his customary feeling of disappointment and heart-hunger, then with the succeeding glow of reassurance, as he reached the little account of money expended. Somehow he could

read between the lines what an effort it was to her to accept his help; it was done only because Pansy mattered so infinitely more than she did; because Pansy must not suffer merely for the reason that Virginia's pride would be hurt in the process of curing her.

What he hardly guessed was the constant vexation, of the pin-prick kind, which Virginia was then enduring from her mother. Grover was a good sort, but she was neither young nor active, and she did object to being maid to two ladies. Moreover, her own mistress, Mrs. Gaunt, was the most considerate of her sex, but Mrs. Mynors was "quite another pair of shoes." As usually happens in such cases, the considerate party was made the victim of the maid's ill-humour, while the inconsiderate brought her mending and renovating with smiling face and got it all done, free of charge, the while she made scornful comments upon Grover's attainments, and wondered how Virgie could stand such a woman about her for a moment.

The nursing home at which Pansy was now placed was just as expensive as the one she occupied formerly. Therefore it was surprising to Gaunt to find that, although both Virginia and her mother were now in town, not to mention Grover, instead of Mrs. Mynors alone, the total spent in a week was less than in those preceding by quite a noticeable amount.

The letter of to-day was an exception in containing a postscript. It was apparently of the least interesting description. A small item in the accounts was marked with an asterisk, and at the foot of the page Virginia had written:

When I come back, I can explain this.

The words sent a thrill through every nerve of the man reading.

"When I come back!"

He leaned forward, seizing old Grim by her ears, and rubbing his hands up and down her neck in the way she loved. "When she comes back, old girl," he whispered. Then he broke off. His eye had wandered round the dreary, untidy, ill-arranged den. Was it a home to which to bring such a bride as his? Was there anything he could do to improve it?

Slowly he rose, and limped into the little sitting-room which he had called hers. There were one or two small articles of her personal possessions left about in it. He wondered whether he could have it done up by the time of her return. He distrusted his own taste profoundly. What did girls like?

He remembered the drawing-room at Perley Hatch, which the Ferrises had recently repainted and papered. No! That was not his idea. He felt that Virginia would never like big bunches of floral decoration all over her walls.

Then he remembered the little room in which Mrs. Mynors had received him at Wayhurst. Tiny as it was, how its charm, its dainty elegance had impressed him! He closed his eyes and recalled its aspect. Ivory paint — yes, that was all right; and walls of a warm, sunny golden brown. How would that suit her? Acting on impulse he rang the bell, and said he wanted to speak to Mrs. Wells.

The housekeeper, when consulted, was delighted with the idea. It had apparently presented itself to the mind of the servants' hall long ago. She would send down a boy at once, to telephone from Manton into Derby for a man to come over the following morning to take the order.

"The furnishing I must leave until Mrs. Gaunt returns," said Gaunt, in a depressed way. "I can see that

this stuff is all wrong, but I can't see what she would put in its place."

"Oh, as to that, sir. If it's a question of what Mrs. Gaunt would like — why, I can tell you that myself, and you won't have far to seek, for we've got it all in the house at this moment," was Mrs. Wells's surprising answer.

"Got it in the house?"

"In the lumber-room, sir. Your great-aunts, the Miss Gaunts, turned all the old things into the lumber-room, after their father died, about fifty years ago, and refurnished great part of the house, so I'm told. There's a great many things up there, and Mrs. Gaunt, when she saw them, she went into raptures over them. Said they was as old as Adam, which I could hardly believe ——" She broke off abruptly, for Gaunt, her morose master, had laughed aloud, and the circumstance was startling.

"Adam's period," he hastened to apologise. "Yes, go on, please. If you showed the lumber-room to Mrs. Gaunt, why have you never mentioned it to me?"

The good woman's eyes grew very round. "Why, sir, you was here when I came," said she. "I concluded you knew all about it. My part was only to see as the things didn't perish, for I have a kind of liking myself for all them antiquities."

Gaunt's eyes were still dancing over the Adam joke; and his wandering gaze had strayed to the mantel, and realised that this was of the same period. Doubtless what made these walnut carved whatnots and arm-chairs look so wrong was their silent clash with the fine simplicity of the dental moulding. As his eye wandered over the faded pink wallpaper, with its brown, green and blue roses, he suddenly perceived, like a man whose eyes are newly opened, that the room was moulded for panels. It struck him that this was the treatment required.

"So Mrs. Gaunt liked the things?"

"Indeed, yes, sir. She said how she would like to use them. I can show you the exact pieces she picked out, sir."

"Come along," said Gaunt impetuously. Here was a glorious idea. Here was something to fill in blank days of waiting! Virgie should find her own room at least habitable; incomplete, of course, and waiting for her touch, but not impossible as at present. It would welcome her, when she came back — *when she came back!*

Would she come?

CHAPTER XX

A CASE FOR INTERPOSITION?

"Why, here you have the awfulest of crimes
For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly!
Yet here is the monster! Why, he's a mere man —
Born, bred and brought up in the usual way."

— R. BROWNING.

IT was six o'clock in the evening. Virginia stepped from the door of the Nursing Home out into Queen Anne Street with a radiant face.

She left Pansy smiling, content, in the hands of people who were not merely experts, but kind and loving. The daily improvement grew more marked. Dr. Danby that day had spoken more encouragingly than ever before. The delight of it, the fascination of watching colour steal back to the cheeks, and light to the eyes; while the awful look of pain vanished from the lines of the mouth, leaving it a child's mouth once more — this was enfolding the elder sister in a sweetness which it seemed no dark future had power to impair. Gaunt was far from her mind; she was living in the present moment — living within the walls of the room that contained Pansy.

A man came rapidly along the street towards her, on the same side of the way. Just as she turned into Portland Place she came face to face with him. It was Gerald Rosenberg. His start of surprise was admirably done. As to Virgie, in the first moment, she was merely glad to see him — ready to take him into the joy that filled her, to share with him her glow of thankfulness and hope.

"Oh!" She stopped, giving him her hand, looking into his face with those eyes that had seemed to him so fathomless as to cause him to hesitate before letting his very being drown in their depths. Now it seemed that they were changed. The girl was, somehow, mysteriously a woman. She retained all her innocence, all her girlish candour, but there was something more, something heroic and splendid. At any rate, it appeared so to the man's enchanted gaze.

"This is indeed good fortune"— he hardly knew what he said. "I heard that you were in town, but hardly hoped — why did you not let Mims know of your being here?"

"Oh, that is easily answered. I have been devoted, body and soul, to my little sister. The first few nights I was in town I spent at the Home, for we did not even know that she would live. I have not had a moment for my friends."

"But she is better now?"

"Yes, thank God! I can hardly speak of it." The tears welled up and misted the changeful eyes. "It is so wonderful — so unspeakable — seeing her, as it were, coming back to me from the grave. If she had died, I can't think what I should have done."

"I remember Mims always said you were such a devoted sister."

Virgie laughed. "So would anybody be devoted to Pansy," she replied cheerfully. "But I am consumed with curiosity. You say that you had heard I was in London. Do tell me how you heard it."

His lip curled and his expression changed. "I heard it from the person most likely to know. Mr. Gaunt told me."

"Mr. Gaunt!" It was too sudden. Usually she had herself perfectly in hand, but the thought of the Ogre,

intruding upon her moment of bliss, touched her inmost feeling, and she grew as white as a sheet. Gerald's eyes never left her face. He saw that pallor, saw the fugitive glance of panic that passed across the eyes like a cloud over the sun. It was so, then; it was as he had feared, as he had secretly known! She had been bought by that malevolent-looking man — the creature who had marked her down in the picture gallery, had pursued, hunted, caught, led captive! The feelings in the young man's heart were for a moment so violent that he could not speak.

Virginia and he had turned mechanically as he uttered the fatal name, and they now began to walk down Portland Place, towards Regent's Street side by side. "Somehow," said her soft voice at last, "it seems very surprising to me that you should have met Mr. Gaunt. Do tell me how it came about. I — I believed that he was at home — in Derbyshire."

The speech showed him the measure of her apprehension. She had thought herself free of her tyrant for a while, and now supposed him to have followed her to London.

"Oh, it was in Derbyshire that I met him," he hastened to assure her. "At the house of some people called Ferris. I went down to interview Ferris about a company that he wants to float — a lead-mine. Your husband was lunching there."

"Lunching at Perley Hatch?" She seemed surprised, he thought.

"Yes. On the same line as I was, I fancy. We all went and had a look at the cave afterwards. I think my father will accept a directorship, and probably Mr. Gaunt also will come on the board."

Before reflecting, she cried, in a pleased voice: "Then does that mean that we shall see something of you? Shall you be coming down sometimes to Derbyshire?"

Gerald almost choked. There was so much to say about this that he knew he had better say nothing. Yet, as in her case, words leaped to his lips before he reflected. "I hardly know. It is a question as to how much I could bear."

"How much you could bear?" Her eyes were raised, astonished, troubled. He knew that if he said what was in his mind, his present chance might vanish in a moment. "I won't say what I meant," he replied in a low tone. "Why should I force my troubles on you? You have enough anxiety with your little sister. But is it too late to get some tea?"

"Oh, yes, I have had tea, thanks!"

"Where are you staying?"

"In Margaret Street — my mother is with me."

"Indeed? Do you think she would receive me, if I were to pay a short call?"

"I am sure she would be pleased. But you will not find her at home now; she has gone to the theatre."

"At this hour?"

"She is dining at her club first. She does not like lodging-house food."

"Do you?"

"Oh, food makes very little difference to me. I put up with it, for I am too tired to go and dine out, after a long day with Pansy."

"I wish you would come and dine with me. I know a charming place quite near here, where they give you Italian things — you are so fond of Italy. Let me take you and give you something to eat, and then you shall go straight back to your rooms and rest. There is so much I want to hear."

Her brows knit. "I have nothing to tell you," she answered slowly.

He blamed himself for having risked the last sentence.

She seemed to turn over his offer in her mind. At last: "No," she said, but he felt with reluctance. "I can't come this evening. I am tired and stupid. Some other evening, if you will ask us both."

"Then must I go and dine alone at my club? My father and Mims are in Switzerland, and I am all alone."

"Oh!" Her pity was awake at once. "I did not know."

"Because you are tired is just why you should come," he went on. "I'm not a stranger, some one whom you must exert yourself to entertain. I'm your friend, am I not, Virgie?"

The last word was hardly breathed.

"Oh, you are — and friends are precious. If you are alone — really — and don't mind a dull person ——"

Even as she spoke he had hailed a taxi, and she was seated in it at his side before she well knew that she had consented.

"This is the one advantage of your being married — I can take you about," said the young man, with an air of quiet confidence. "Gaunt seemed anxious about you. He said you had been unwell, and would, I am sure, be grateful to me for looking after you, and preventing your dining on a poached egg, which is what I know to have been your immoral intention."

She laughed. "Tell him to stop a moment at Margaret Street. I must tell my maid not to keep the poached egg hot," she replied.

This was done, and he took her to Ciliani's, the most charming restaurant in London. There was no band to drown talk, the tables were arranged so that parties did not intrude upon each other. They found places near a window, and as Virgie seated herself she thought of that awful lunch with her husband at the Savoy Restaurant. The memory made her wince. She remembered her

panic terror, her dread of what was to come, her timid attempts to seem at ease. Little had she known what really awaited her.

She resigned herself now to Gerald's care with a sudden beautiful sensation of relief. He was an old friend. In fact, the Rosenbergs were practically the only people she knew who belonged to the life at Lissendean as well as to more recent times. Perhaps Gerald realised how precious an asset such a link was, for he began to talk to her of Lissendean, and of those happy days when they had ridden and golfed together, had roamed the country with lunch in their pockets, and acted charades in the old hall.

All through the charm of such talk Virginia's inner self, the sentinel conscience which ruled her, was helping her to gird on her armour. She was keenly aware that Gerald's first mention of her husband had caught her unprepared, also that Gerald had seen and interpreted her confusion.

It was not until coffee had been served, and he was lighting his cigarette that the moment came. He leaned forward and spoke, composedly, but with a weight which made itself felt.

"I left you — unavoidably — at my father's command, one lovely evening in June. When we parted, there were in my heart feelings which I can't but believe you must have seen and interpreted. A fortnight later I learned that you were about to be married. Has it occurred to you to wonder whether I suffered?"

Virginia was drawing her gloves from her little beaded bag, and daintily pulling out the fingers. "But why should I suppose that you would be suffering?" she demanded quietly.

He hesitated. "Are you being quite straightforward with me, Virgie?"

Again she countered with a question. "Is there any

obligation for me to be quite straightforward with you, Mr. Rosenberg? Complete straightforwardness is a large demand."

He grew nettled. His elbow rested on the table, his handsome eyes were full upon her. "Honestly, do you think you treated me fairly?" he wished to know.

"Certainly. I don't see quite what you mean," was her steady reply.

"Then — then you really did not know that I was in love with you?"

"I did not. Of course not."

"Don't try to blind me," he went on urgently, his voice a little unsteady. "I am better informed than you think. I know that you had never seen Gaunt until that day at Hertford House. You went thence, and without a word, or a sign, you engaged yourself to marry a man who was a total stranger. Do you suppose I do not guess that you were forced into that?"

"If you guess so, your guess is quite wrong. I had heard of Mr. Gaunt all my life. I had a romantic idea of him — girls do, you know. I was told, by mother, various things about him, and I knew he was unhappy and lonely. We looked at one another — in the Gallery — that day ——"

Her voice tailed off, and she seemed absorbed in the diligent pushing down of the soft kid upon her fingers.

Gerald was baffled. The same idea crossed his mind which had gripped her mother's fancy. It had been then a case of mutual love at first sight, one of those strange, inexplicable attractions that seem like magnetism. He looked at the wedding-ring and the other beautiful rings upon the little hand moving so dexterously. He thought how zealously a middle-aged, unattractive man would strive to secure the affection of this wonderful creature. Could it really be that she was contented with her lot?

After all, had she made her calculations? Had she realised that his own people would make difficulties, that she and he would be none too well off at first if they married? Had she deliberately chosen the richer man, as his father had insinuated? . . .

He recalled her husband's words, spoken only two days previously. "My wife's beauty is the least part of her charm. She is pure gold throughout." Was that true, or was Gaunt successfully hoodwinked? So deft was Virginia's parry that he could not be sure.

When first they met that evening, he had had no plan at all; he was merely filled with an aching desire to behold her face. Now it dawned upon him that, if she were the calculating, self-seeking person whom he sometimes supposed her, she could not suffer from being in his society, and there was no reason why he should not see a good deal of her.

"Love at first sight — most interesting!" was what he said aloud; and a long interval elapsed before he spoke at all.

She assented to his definition, with the least little ghost of a smile.

"How long are you likely to be in town?" he asked abruptly.

"I think I shall stay until they can take Pansy to the sea," she replied. "Dr. Danby says that in about ten days she can be moved on a water-bed in a motor-car to Cliftonville. Osbert says she is to have just what the doctor orders, so I shall arrange for her to go that way. It is, as you may suppose, very difficult for me to be so long away from Omberleigh, but my husband is very good and patient. He knows it was a matter of life and death."

"Well, as long as you are in town, I shall make it my business to see that you have some fresh air every day," he announced. "May I bring a motor to-morrow round

to the Home, and take you and Mrs. Mynors to dine somewhere a little way out of town? It is still light until past eight o'clock, and in an hour or so we could get to Essendon, or Chenies, or one of those pretty little places — no need to stew in London these deadly August days."

Her eye lit up, and she began to speak impatiently, then checked herself.

"Now, say just what you were going to say."

She laughed. "I was going to be barefaced enough to ask you to take Tony as well. He has been in camp, with his O.T.C., but he comes to London to-morrow, and I want him to have a good time."

"By all means. Couldn't you get away half an hour sooner?"

She shook her head. "I must stay until they turn me out; Pansy would fret if I did not. But I will be as punctual as I can, and tell mother and Tony to come round to Queen Anne Street."

"On no account! I shall fetch them from Margaret Street on my way to you."

"You are very kind and thoughtful," she responded joyfully. "I do feel that a motor run would do me good after all those hours in the sick room."

. . . . . .

For the first few days Virginia said nothing of her meeting with Gerald in her letters to Gaunt. This was not because she wished to hide them, but because she habitually mentioned only such points as seemed essential — Pansy's progress and her own expenditure. Tony's expenses, her mother's club dinners and theatres, came out of her own private allowance. It was wonderful how far a pound could be made to go in museums and picture palaces for Tony's benefit. After a few days, however, she thought it better to mention what was going on, lest

her husband should think there might be something clandestine about it. She wrote accordingly, in answer to his demand for an account of her own health:

I have been feeling very much better lately, for Mr. Rosenberg — whom I met last week in the street, and who told me he had been to Perley Hatch, and had seen you — has been taking mother and me for drives in the evening. His people are out of town, and he has the car to himself. We have been to Windsor and Burnham Beeches, to Virginia Water, and all sorts of places. The air does me a great deal of good. I am really quite well now.

Gaunt read it grimly. He told himself that he might have expected it. Was it likely that Rosenberg would leave her alone, having learned that she was in London without him?

The test was growing more acute, the shadowy tie, which bound her to him, more attenuated. She would never come back. He went into the little sitting-room, wherein the decorators were at work, and wondered at his own folly. He was carrying that folly to an absurd pitch. He was having a copy executed of the statue of Love from the Wallace collection. It was to stand upon a column in the charming semicircular bay window, looking out upon the prim terrace garden.

Should he write now — write and offer her her release?

He sneered at himself for having ascertained the limits of his own penitence. Although he was ready to swear that he would do anything for her happiness, he could not do that. Having once seen her, at his table, on the terrace, in the hall, having heard her voice in the stark silence of his desolate house, the craving to have her back was, he had to confess, even greater than the craving for

her content. Besides, he argued, she had been willing once. She had accepted her destiny, had meant to do her duty, spoken of being bound by her vows. When she found that there was love — even adoration — to be lavished upon her, would she not become reconciled?

Ah! the time for that had gone by. Rosenberg had now stepped into the picture. She knew nothing of his own change of heart. To her he was a gloomy and cruel tyrant. Had he used his chance when wonderfully he had obtained it — had he not horrified her at the outset by his unmanly, despicable behaviour — what might not have been possible?

Thoughts such as these were his torment day and night; and his sleep went from him.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Mynors and Gerald Rosenberg were strolling side by side upon the North Terrace of Windsor Castle. It was growing late, and they were expecting to be ejected by officials shortly; but Virginia and Tony had gone off together to look at Eton College, and to sigh over the deplorable fact that Tony would never occupy his dead father's place in Brooke's House.

"I found it out accidentally," Mrs. Mynors was saying, "when she first came to town. She was in a terrible state of distress about Pansy, and would not go away from the nursing home when night came. They were very kind, and let her lie on a sofa in a sitting-room, and I was in an arm-chair. She dropped off to sleep a dozen times, I should think, and each time woke in a kind of nightmare, crying out to him that he might torture her as he liked, but she was going to Pansy; he might cut her to pieces when she got back."

"Good God!" said Gerald.

"It was dreadful to listen," sighed the mother. "First, she was repeating: 'I am not afraid — I am not

afraid of you any more!' Then she was begging him not to make her try to walk, because she could not stand. I can't think what he can have been doing to her, but I have made up my mind that, by hook or by crook, she must not go back to him. The thing is: How to prevent it?"

The drops were standing upon the young man's forehead. He had had hints before, but this was the first time he had succeeded in being alone with Mrs. Mynors long enough to hear all.

"How could you — how could you have permitted it?" he broke out violently. "Such an inhuman sacrifice!"

"My dear Gerald, does the modern mother control her children? Oh, don't think I am saying a word to disparage my darling. I know she is a martyr; I know she sacrificed herself for us. But I implored her not to do so. If only ——" She broke off. He waited, feverishly eager, and as she did not continue, broke out:

"Well, if only what?"

"If only she had never gone to London," murmured the mother in a low voice. "Then he would never have seen her, and she would never have seen — you!"

"Never have seen me?"

"Oh, I know it was not the first time you had met. But it was the fatal time. Poor innocent child! she gave you her heart, and you handed it back with a polite thank you. Did you not, dear boy?"

"Great heavens, Mrs. Mynors, do you know what you are saying? You are suggesting that Virgie loves me."

"But surely that is not news to you?" she said, with lifted brows, as one astonished at unlooked-for density of perception.

He turned impulsively away from her, leaning his arms upon the grey stone wall and gazing away into the dusk. Some moments passed in a wild kind of silence. Then

the castle warder called to them that he was closing the doors. Without a word the young man moved, walking at his companion's side through the little door in the wall, under the arch, out upon the ramp which descends past St. George's Chapel to the large gate. He was as white as a sheet.

Not a soul was in sight. They paused, gazing down upon the sunk garden which now blooms in the dry moat of the Round Tower. Suddenly Gerald burst into speech. Forgetting for the moment all that his father had told him of this woman, he poured out the story of how he had been overpersuaded, how his father — urging upon him the imprudence of such a match — had coaxed him away that last night of Virgie's stay, when the confession of his feeling was trembling on the tip of his tongue.

"That was what I did," he said. "I was just waiting. I knew of no danger to her. If I had had a hint, if you had sent me a line to tell me that she was being hunted. But all the same," he broke off, his eyes burning in his head, "all the same, to me it is inconceivable that any man, however sunk, could have been cruel to her! Afterwards he might — later, but not at first — not when he had but just acquired that perfect thing for his own! Oh, it makes me mad! I daren't think of it! It's too incredibly ugly — too wild. Are you sure? You don't think those cries of hers that you overheard can have been delirium? It seems altogether outside the pale of possibility that he should have done anything but grovel at her feet!"

Mrs. Mynors had her lovely face averted. She sighed. "There is more in it than that, Gerald," she murmured in a low voice. "I fear it is worse than you think. Have you ever heard of such a thing as a secret maniac? Do you know that there are men, outwardly sane, who go about the world like other people, but who have one single

streak of insanity — a bee in the bonnet, as the vulgar saying has it?"

He looked sick with horror. "Do you mean that she is bound for life to a man who isn't sane?"

"Gaunt has had a sad life. I know his story. He thought himself badly used by a woman. It made a profound impression upon him. It is his fixed idea. When I heard my child's broken ravings, the awful thought flashed through my mind — has he some horrible idea of making Virginia pay for another woman's sins?"

"If so, he must be mad, raving mad. We could get him put into an asylum," hissed Gerald.

"Not so easily as you think. Such men are very cunning. You see, he has allowed her to come away from him. He is acting, as every one would say, a most magnanimous part. I and my orphan children are the creatures of his bounty. It would be difficult, indeed, to bring home to him what he may make her endure in private."

"Unbearable," muttered Gerald. "I hardly dare let my mind dwell upon it. But you are going merely upon what you overheard. She has said nothing to you of his being unkind?"

"She is far too proud. I judge by what she does not say. Her reticence to me, her mother, can have but one explanation. He has forbidden her, on pain of certain punishment, to say anything. I know that it is so. I am certain of it."

His burning eyes, searching through the twilight which gathered thickly about them, saw the dim figures of Tony and his sister advancing through the gateway. "There they are," he muttered hoarsely. "We must drop this now, but mind, we must speak of it again. Something must be done. If all this is true, I swear she shall never go back to him. I'll see to that. She loves me! Oh, what a gigantic blunder life is!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER

"Take back the love you gave, I claim
Only a memory of the same;
With this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with me."— BROWNING.

FOR ten days more Virginia's life floated upon a summer sea. She had Tony, she had Pansy, she had Gerald. She was away from Gaunt, and his letters made no demand upon her. He never mentioned the date, or even alluded to the fact, of her return. She had, however, set herself a limit. When Pansy went to the seaside she must go back to her prison.

The nurse who was now in charge of the case would be permitted to accompany the child, so that there would be no valid reason for Virginia to go too. Mrs. Mynors, who was having the time of her life in London, though she grumbled incessantly at the need to keep her expenditure so rigorously within bounds, was not anxious for the move. Her daughter, however, was scrupulously determined that it should take place at the earliest date which Dr. Danby would sanction. She was very grateful to her husband. Her gratitude had taken the edge off the bitterness with which she regarded him. Her fear remained, but his present generosity could not but do something to salve the wound his cruelty had made. To take undue advantage of his kindness was what she would never suffer herself to do.

Yet, when the time of parting drew near, it became

evident to every one that Pansy would fret so much at her sister's departure as to make it likely that her grief might react disastrously upon her frail returning health.

This distressed Virginia terribly. She hardly knew which way her duty lay. It seemed almost as if she must stay with the child until she was strong enough to be reasoned with. At least Gaunt's health would not suffer from her absence. Yet the situation galled her. Here they all were, living upon his bounty, while he waited alone in Derbyshire bereft of his newly made wife. Had she loved him, all would have been otherwise, she would have felt it natural that he should help her, and she would not have hesitated to choose the path of duty, even if absence from him had been a misery to her. As things stood, she was uncomfortably aware that, so far, she had not fulfilled her share of the contract. He had paid her price, but she was devoted, body and soul, to Pansy and not to him.

That night she cried bitterly when alone in bed, while the conflict raged in her heart; and strangely, that night, at Omberleigh, Gaunt had the illusion that he heard her sobbing, as he had heard her upon the night when she received the news of Pansy's danger. So vivid was the impression that he got up, opened the door of her room, and stood a long moment, in the moonlight, gazing at the smooth, empty bed and the dim outlines of the furniture, before he could realise that she was not there.

Next morning she wrote to him:

I am in a difficulty. Pansy is making herself unhappy about going to the sea without me. She has fretted so that Dr. Danby spoke seriously to me yesterday, asking if I could not manage to stay a few days longer just to settle her into her new surroundings. We have found rooms very near the sea, not at Cliftonville, but at Worth-

ing. The roads there are so nice and flat that she can be wheeled out upon the Parade every day, and the doctor says as soon as she is a little stronger she will lose this silly fancy about my leaving her. I am ashamed to mention it to you, when you have done and are doing so much. I will be guided by what you wish. I had arranged definitely to go back to Omberleigh on Monday. If you think I had better keep to that date I will do so. If I may instead take Pansy to Worthing, and stay there with her till the following Friday, returning to you on Saturday, I shall be most grateful, but I feel guilty in asking for it, when I have already made such large demands upon your patience.

The answer to this letter came by telegram:

Stay as long as advisable.— Gaunt.

Tony brought this message round to the Home from Margaret Street in the course of the morning, and great, indeed, was the joy it caused. Pansy was a different creature when she learned that "that dear old trump of an Osbert was going to let Virgie come to Worthing."

There was a tea-party in the little invalid's room that afternoon to celebrate the occasion. Gerald Rosenberg was present. The journey was to be made in his car, and he thought he would take a week's holiday at Worthing, and have a run round the country thereabout.

It was a delightful plan, and in Virginia's eyes it had no drawbacks. She was now wholly at ease with Gerald. Since that first day, he had asked no awkward questions, trenched on no dangerous ground. He had been the best of friends, and was apparently quite content to talk to her mother for long periods during which she and Tony roamed together.

Under his auspices the removal to Worthing took place

most satisfactorily. The day was dull and chilly, but there was no rain, and Pansy's spirits never flagged.

For the first day or two following their arrival, there was so much to be done, the elder sister's time was so fully occupied in making all the arrangements that were necessary, that she hardly realised how time was flying. It was on Thursday morning that she awoke with a terrible sensation of depression, amounting to horror. She had dreamed of Gaunt. This had happened to her twice, and only twice, before. Once, upon the night following their first wordless encounter at Hertford House. It had been an oddly vivid dream, producing a feeling of excitement which persisted after she awoke. The second occasion was at Omberleigh. It occurred — though she naturally was unaware of the fact — on the night during which her husband wandered through the park in an agony of remorse. That dream too had left an impression which seemed disproportionate. This last was, however, the most haunting of all.

In it she found herself searching through the house at Omberleigh, looking for Gaunt, who could not be found. She went upstairs to the garrets, where Mrs. Wells had once taken her, but the rooms seemed to have been altered. In her dream she said: "If I come to the room with the Sheraton furniture in it, I shall know where I am." She could not find it, however, and after descending stairs which were the stairs of the Hertford House Gallery, she ran along a passage in search of the sitting-room she had been told she might call her own. That, too, had vanished; in its place was something pale, dim, and shapeless. All empty — Gaunt was not to be seen, and she had been made aware that it was most important that she should find him. She passed out into the garden, in a wet mist which hid everything from her sight, and she dare not hasten for fear of stepping upon his dead body.

Terror took her, and she tried, as one tries in dreams, to run. Her feet were rooted to the ground, she was incapable of movement; and out of the fog came Gaunt, with his eyes closed. He was repeating words, but in so low a tone that she could not immediately hear. She listened, first attentively, then eagerly, because she knew that it was so tremendously urgent that she should understand; and at last something reached her consciousness. "Are you coming? No. I said you would not come. I never dared to think you would. But you promised — you promised ——"

She tried to say: "Here I am, do you not see me?" But she failed to articulate, and awoke with the sound of his muttered words ringing in her ears.

The morning scene upon which she looked out was gay. The sun shone lazily over a calm sea, there was no wind, and the seafront was already lively with the passing figures of those who had been out for an early dip. When she went into Pansy's room she found that the child had slept without awakening the whole night through; and was greeted with a smile of content and freedom from pain which made her heart swell with joy and gratitude.

This was Gaunt's doing! Without him, this marvellous recovery would have been impossible. It was he who had not only furnished the funds, but who had sent her to Dr. Danby, perhaps the one man in the world who could have achieved so wonderful a result. For the authorities, at first so grave, now began to talk of a cure. Lameness there would always be, but the nurse was certain that the power of locomotion would be recovered. Virgie knelt by the bed, her whole mind flooded with the poignant memory of her pitiful dream. "Oh, Pansy blossom," said she, "isn't it wonderful? What do we not owe to Osbert?"

"Yes," said Pansy, turning her head eagerly, "do you know, Virgie, I was just thinking about that. Nurse talked to me a bit yesterday. She said I must not be selfish. She said how good you had been to sacrifice so much of your time to me; and how miserable it is for Osbert all alone at Omberleigh. I feel rather ashamed of myself, darling, and I can see quite plainly that I must let you go."

"Oh, Pansy!" cried Virginia brokenly, seeing her way thus unexpectedly made clear. Was she glad or sorry? Her imagination took a peep into the future, and for a minute sheer fright paralysed her. Then her dream floated before her, and she almost heard the words: "Are you coming? You promised! You promised!"

Yes, she was coming. She would keep her promise, as she had always intended; but now, for the first time, she faced the terror of it. Once away from her gaoler, in the insistence of the present moment, she had been able to forget. Other things had filled her heart. Apprehension for Pansy's safety had blotted out apprehension for Virginia's happiness. Now with vehemence her panic fear resurged.

. . . . . .

Down in the sitting-room, Mrs. Mynors, daintily attired in seaside raiment and white shoes, had just rung for breakfast. Tony and Gerald, who had been together for a swim, walked past under the window. Gerald stopped and called up that he was going along to his hotel for breakfast, and would be back in an hour, decently attired.

"Come in and have some breakfast with us, just as you are," urged Mrs. Mynors, leaning from the open casement.

"Yes, yes," cried Tony, gripping his arm joyfully.

"Don't mind if I do," answered Gerald, and ascended the stairs leisurely, while the boy dashed up to a higher

floor, to put down his towels. "Tony met a pal down on the sands," remarked Rosenberg, as he shook hands with Virginia's mother. "I have taken two tickets on the *char-à-banc* for them to go to Arundel. If you will stay with Pansy the arrangements are quite complete."

"That's a splendid idea," replied Mrs. Mynors with satisfaction. "You are a good general, Gerald."

He looked somewhat doubtful, as though a cloud passed over his mood.

"I hate it," he said, "but I must do something. If I don't, she will go back to that crazy beast to-morrow as sure as the sun rises, and what can we do then?"

"My dear Gerald, why do you say that you hate it? You are not going to do anything to which anybody could take exception!"

"No, but I am going to trick her with a put-up job. If she ever found that out she would dislike it. I have seen so much of her lately, and her sincerity and simplicity are almost terrible."

Virgie's mother smiled rather superciliously. "Yet she can keep her own counsel," she remarked incisively. "I have done all that I knew to secure her confidence, and never one word has she let slip. But for the fact that she never mentions him and will not let me see letters from him, I should hardly suspect ——"

"You are sure?" He turned from the window with intent expression. "Remember, I am going almost entirely upon what you tell me ——"

"Gerald, it seemed to me that I must have some certainty, and I did a thing which you will probably condemn. I looked at a letter from him to her, which was accidentally left accessible. I made a copy of it to show you. This is it, word for word. There was no more."

He grew scarlet. The pretty woman was approaching him with the bit of paper. Was it taking an unfair ad-

vantage of Virgie to steal a march upon her loyalty thus? He told himself that the end justified the means. He was too deep in love now. He could not draw back. He took the paper and read:

OMBERLEIGH.
Tuesday.

Yours of 5th duly recd. Glad journey satisfactorily accomplished. Rooms seem reasonable. Suppose Mrs. M. will go back to Wayhurst in a few days, leaving child in charge of nurse. Trust you have done as I ordered you with regard to m.c. This is important.— O. G."

"That is all — absolutely all — that was written on the sheet of paper," murmured Mrs. Mynois, watching him read.

"What is m.c., do you know?"

"Have no idea. A nice letter for a man to write to his few weeks' bride, is it not?"

"It shows them to be on very peculiar terms," he admitted, with knit brows. "Yes, you must be right. The man is a bit cracked. Was there no beginning to the letter?"

"Nothing."

"Yet you think there is no chance of our being able to get him certified as of unsound mind?"

"Not the least; because he is very sane, except on this point. Have you asked Mr. Ferris what he thinks of him?"

"Ferris thinks him most able. Says he is the best magistrate in the district. They all down there seem to suppose that he is quite devoted to his wife. They laugh at him as an old bachelor hopelessly in love."

"That letter is the letter of a man in love, is it not?"

Gerald shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, I have

been extremely careful to keep off the subject with her," he said. "There is one thing, however, which makes me horribly suspicious that you may be right — that he is being actually unkind to her. I mean this. She seems to believe that, when she leaves here, it is final. Now and then, when she is off her guard, she seems to assume that she will never see any of us again. I did what amounted to some pretty open fishing for an invitation to Omberleigh the other day. She was wholly unresponsive."

"She did admit to me, in one letter, that she did very wrong to marry him," slowly said Mrs. Mynors.

"She did?" he cried quickly.

"She practically admitted that her marriage was a failure as far as she was concerned. I will show you that bit of the letter, though most of it is private. I have it here."

Upon his eager assent she produced that letter from Virginia, which Gaunt had intercepted, and read a paragraph to him:

. . . What I have done is wrong. I know that now. I half knew it all the time. But what else was there for me to do? I believe God knows I did it for the best. I was at the end of my own strength; I was at the end of all our money. I had you all dependent upon me, and I knew I was going to break down.

I felt I had to save you, and, Oh, mother, you can't, you simply must not deny that I have done that! . . .

Mrs. Mynors glanced at the young man's face. It was set and hard.

"You should have shown me that before. I think it conclusive," said he. "Only a most unhappy woman could have written so." He broke off with a catch in his breath. "And to think that I had failed her, that

she was in those desperate straits and I never knew! Oh, ye gods, how blind we are! But you see, don't you, that the fact of my deserting her then makes it more incumbent upon me to save her now, if I can? Mad or sane, there can be no doubt that the brute must be desperately jealous. We only want suspicious circumstances and somebody who will be sure to mention them to him. If I mistake not, Mr. Ferris is the very man for our purpose. The fact that he himself admires Virgie to the point of fatuity will give the necessary edge to his malice."

"Have you heard from him? He is coming to-day?"

"Yes, that's all right," replied Gerald hastily. "No more now; I hear her on the stairs."

Virginia came in. Happiness and returning health together had made her radiant. She wore to-day a pale mauve frock, and a hat trimmed with a garland of mauve and faint blue flowers. Like Mr. Bent on another occasion, Gerald found himself distracted with the wonder as to which of the two colours matched her eyes.

"What a day!" she said. "Oh, what a heavenly blue day, isn't it? Have you come to breakfast, Gerald? How nice!"

"Gerald is afraid he may be obliged to go back to town to-morrow," remarked her mother, as they sat down to table. "He wants to have one good day's motoring for the last, and as the driving does you so much good, I have arranged to stay with Pansy and leave you free to go with him."

"Tony and I! Oh, how splendid!" cried Virgie, sparkling. "I, too, must leave to-morrow, and I want to have a really delightful day for the last." She broke off a little abruptly, afraid lest what she said might be by implication uncomplimentary to her husband. Both her hearers remarked it, and they exchanged glances.

They did not say that Tony would not be going. Instead, Gerald produced a map from his pocket, and spread it on a corner of the table.

"I have more or less thought out a route," said he. "I wonder if you will approve. There were two places which you told me that you would particularly like to see — one was Bodiam Castle. The other was the Roman Pavement at Bignor. I have been talking to Baines (his chauffeur), and he says it would be quite possible to do both. It is a fifty-mile run to Bodiam — less than two hours. We could lunch on the way back — say at Lewes — and go on to Bignor, where we could have tea, and get back any time we like."

"How simply perfect!" laughed Virgie as she helped herself to marmalade with an appetite which was so recent an acquirement that she herself could not understand it. Nobody present noticed it. Mrs. Mynors would never have known had her daughter starved herself to death under her eyes. Across the girl's mind stole the thought of some one who had watched every mouthful, had hectored and bullied her into eating.

She leant across to Gerald, and perused the map with attention. "What a way it seems! Bodiam is in the very eastest corner of Sussex. And Bignor is more than the whole way back — positively on the other side of Worthing! Are you sure it won't be too far? I am so afraid Pansy will miss me."

"You forget," put in her mother, "Pansy is going to have the first of her electric baths to-day, and nurse says she will have to be very quiet for some hours after it. Besides, it will accustom her to the idea of being without you."

"Yes. That is true," was the reply, while a shadow crept over the gladness of the face.

"I expect Osbert is beginning to be restive, isn't he?" asked her mother, in order to gauge the effect of a sudden reference to Gaunt.

The effect, as always, was a momentary confusion, slight but evident. She soon rallied. "He is very patient," she replied, while her thoughts went obstinately back to the dream garden, veiled in mist, to the man who approached her, groping blindly, to his words, "Are you coming back? No!"

"It seems wonderful that he *can* be patient under the circumstances," observed Gerald drily. He did not pursue the subject. He was folding up his map. "I told the chauffeur to be round in exactly twenty minutes from now. I must bolt, and do a change. Can you be ready in twenty minutes?"

She eagerly assented, and he caught up his hat and ran out of the room, with a smile to her of glowing, eager anticipation which set her heart dancing in response. What a dear fellow he was! How good he had been to them all! He had saved quite a lot of Gaunt's money by taking them down to Worthing in the car. She did not ask herself why it was terrible to take her husband's money, but easy to take Gerald's.

She ran away upstairs, calling to Tony. He appeared from his room, got up in a striped flannel suit, a soft linen collar, a most *recherché* tie, and a Panama hat — a real one.

"Why, Tony, you have made yourself a swell!" cried the girl.

"Pretty decent, isn't it?" was the gratified reply. "Left me any brekker?"

"Plenty, but be quick, we have to start in twenty minutes."

"Not me, sis. I'm going with Mullins Major to Arundel."

"To Arundel! Oh, no, Tony, you are going with Gerald and me in the car!"

"Not much. This is heaps better. Good old Gerald bought us the tickets — front places, and he has given me half a sov. for our grub. Isn't he great?"

"Oh, Tony!" She stood back as the boy ran down the stairs whistling gaily. "Did Gerald give you that suit, too, and that overwhelmingly elegant hat?"

"He did. Took me into the town the first day we got here and rigged me out."

Virgie burst out laughing. She was so glad that Tony should be young — should put on a bit of "swank." How dear of Gerald to be so good to him!

Money makes life very easy. The thought turned her grave once more. Am I mercenary? she asked herself. Does love of money mean the desire to obtain good doctors and nursing, to educate a boy well, to live cleanly and keep out of debt? With a sigh she admitted that her marriage had been mercenary. Yet how small a share of life's good things would have prevented her from making so hideous a mistake — a mistake which as yet she had hardly begun to pay for. Oh, why, why, had Gerald stepped aside and failed her at the critical moment?

"If I had only had patience, if only I had waited," she told herself, "it would have come right! He as good as told me so that first night we dined together. I ought to have refused to do what I knew to be wrong, and left the consequences to God."

She made herself ready for the drive, slipped into Pansy's room, and to her relief found the child quite prepared for her going. "Gerald told me yesterday that he should take you," she said sedately.

Gerald was then heard calling for Virgie, and with a hasty kiss she ran off. Both the plotters heaved a sigh of relief when they found she took Tony's defection in

good part. The boy came down from his half-eaten breakfast to see them off, and the car spun away, up to Broadwater and Sompting, and on along the northern slopes of those magical South Downs, the love of which can never fade from a Sussex heart.

Virgie's heart sang as the sunny miles whizzed past. She and Gerald were together, and who knew what might come after? She caught herself wishing that an accident might terminate the day, that she might be fatally injured, and gasp out her life in Gerald's arms. Gaunt would be legally compelled to continue the allowances to her family. The idea fascinated her, so that at length, after a long silence, she said to her companion: "Isn't there a piece of poetry about two people riding together for the last time? The man said he wished the world would end at the end of the ride — do you know it?"

"Can't say I do. I'm not much at poetry," he answered apologetically, "but he was a wise chap if he wanted to end off at the best bit. So you think we are in like case?" he stooped to look into her eyes.

She was shaken into remembrance, and stood on guard in a moment. "Oh, no, of course not! What nonsense! I was only thinking to myself in the silly way I sometimes do."

"Just so. For you the world is but just beginning. You are returning to-morrow to the arms of the man who loved you so devotedly that for the sake of calling you his own he was ready to come to the rescue of your family. For me the case is very, very different. I don't know who could blame me if I wished that this day should end my life."

She laughed. "But that is really nonsense. You are a man — you can go where you like and do as you like. I must do as some one else wills all my life long."

"You think that I can do as I like, Virgie?"

"Of course you can."

"If I did, you would be distinctly surprised. I should tell the chauffeur to change his course — or, rather, to continue on, past Lewes, to Newhaven; and I should carry you on board the first steamer that sailed, and we should vanish across the sea and start life together in some glorious new land, and you would be mine — all mine!"

He spoke half banteringly, but very tenderly, and she hardly knew how to take him.

"As I am I, and as you are you, that is out of the question, you know," he went on, almost in a whisper. "You are not the girl to break your oath and I am not the man to tempt you, even if I thought I could do it with success. So all will go on as before. We shall be together to-day and we shall part to-morrow; and for the rest of my life I shall be fully occupied in resisting the temptation to cut Gaunt's throat."

Virgie decided that she was expected to laugh, and did so, but very softly.

"Don't talk like that," she begged him wistfully. "Let us be quite happy, and think about Pansy, and how wonderful it is that she should be getting well."

CHAPTER XXII

THE ROMAN VILLA

"When you and I behind the Veil are past,
Oh! but the long, long while the world shall last,
Which of our Coming and Departure heeds
As much as Ocean of a pebble cast.
One moment in Annihilation's Waste,
One moment of the Well of Life to taste —
The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
Draws to the dawn of nothing! — Oh, make haste!"

— OMAR KHAYYÁM.

THE docility with which Gerald accepted the change of subject was completely reassuring to Virginia. His words led her to suppose that he imagined all to be well between herself and her husband. She gave herself up to fullest enjoyment of the fine weather, the swift motion, the beautiful country.

Bodiam Castle she found entrancing, and her fresh, almost childlike interest in exploring it gave Gerald a kind of pleasure hard to explain. Her unconsciousness put him upon his honour; yet it was subtly alluring, too. It urged him to find out what would happen if she could be brought face to face with the truth about herself and him.

He found himself lost in contemplation of the curious subtlety of her nature, as contrasted with its simplicity. He knew, as it happened, that her marriage was most unhappy. He doubted whether he could have discovered as much without the information given him by her mother. Her reserve was impenetrable. If she betrayed herself,

it was quite involuntarily, in some phrase which, to him who knew, bore a tragic significance. "You are a man — you can do as you like. I must do as some one else wills, all my life long."

This was as near as she had come, in words, to lifting the veil so carefully dropped. He ranged her qualities one against the other — her incapacity for flirtation, her power of preserving a dignified secrecy. Artlessness combined with prudence! It was another such apparent contradiction which had mystified Gaunt — her hard toil and ceaseless sacrifice, taken in conjunction with her regard for appearances, her love of dainty raiment. As a matter of fact, there was no contradiction. Innate pride and refinement accounted for attributes which seemed to clash.

The day's programme was carried through with much success. They lunched at Lewes, and thence, hugging the northern edge of the Downs, they passed to Steyning and on through Storrington to Pulborough. Here they had an early tea, being warned that no tea was obtainable at Bignor; and went on, through the exquisite late afternoon, along roads which grew to be what Virgie described as "lanier and more laney."

It was as they approached Bignor that Gerald said:

"As soon as Baines has set us down he is going to run the car into Chichester and back. I am expecting a man down for a couple of nights from town, and I told him to come to Chichester, because I thought we could pick him up from thence more easily. Baines will run there in no time —'tisn't more than twelve or fifteen miles each way, and he can fill up his petrol-tank there. He'll be back by the time we have done our sightseeing."

"Bringing the man with him?" she asked, in evident disappointment.

"Yes. By the way, it's a friend of yours — Mr. Ferris, from Perley Hatch."

"*What!*" cried Virgie, with so sharp an accent of dislike that he was startled.

"Don't you like him? I thought they were friends of yours — they spoke most warmly of you," he began awkwardly.

"Oh, his wife is all right, but he — do you know, Gerald, I think he is odious," said she warmly. "It will just spoil our day, having him with us! What a pity!"

"Have I put my foot into it? You don't know how sorry I am," said Gerald warmly. "I wouldn't have done it for worlds; but I didn't like him to come down and spend the evening alone in Worthing. I thought we could dine at Pulborough, and go home at leisure by moonlight."

"Well, promise me one thing — you won't sit in front with Baines and leave me behind with him, will you?" she begged. "I really couldn't bear that. You don't know what an outsider he is."

He was fervent in his protestations that she should not be left to the society of the dashing Percy. He was a good deal put out by her evident distaste of the whole arrangement. He had never heard her speak so decidedly about any one in her life as she expressed herself with regard to Ferris.

The talk was put a stop to by their arrival in the narrow lane where a small finger-post announced: "This way to the Roman Villa."

They paused, alighted; Gerald put a wrap over his arm for her, gave his final instructions to Baines, and the car hurried on to the forge, where the width of the road permitted it to turn and run back along the lane by which they had come.

"He will be out on the high road in two or three miles, and then he can let her rip," said Gerald; "but he can't be back for an hour, so we will take things easy."

They leisurely ascended the grassy field which leads to the carefully covered-in and precious pavements.

Then for a while Virgie forgot everything in the delight of examining this wonderful relic of a bygone civilisation. The sweet-faced, elderly lady who is custodian of the place, and speaks of it with reverence and fervour which are infectious, warmed towards the beauty and enthusiasm of this visitor. She showed her all that was to be seen, and explained each small detail of plan and execution. Virgie reconstructed in her own mind the entire existence of the wealthy officials, exiled from all that constituted their world, and cast away among these barbarian British in a fold of the Sussex hills, far, as it seemed, from all communication with their kind. Then, pointing across the valley to the romantic swell of the southern Downs, the custodian told how Stane Street, the great Roman highway, had crossed the hills from Chichester, just opposite where they stood. The Roman noble's sentinels must have seen every figure, every horseman, as he topped the rise, and have kept him in sight as he approached, the whole way into the valley. All gone! Even the semblance of the track wiped out! It would be ten miles before Baines would strike the still surviving section of the Roman road.

The hour was nearly expired when they had seen all, and they strolled away to find somewhere to sit down until the car's return. Finally they sat upon the grass, Gerald's raincoat under them, near the lane, and watched the sunset fade from the sky.

Gerald reverted to the coming of Ferris, and said how sorry he was to have made so stupid a plan. Virgie answered with impulsive penitence. She could not think how she came to be so disagreeable about a trifle — when he had given her this glorious day, and shown her such

grand things, when she owed all her pleasure to him. She felt ashamed of herself.

"I am so glad to have seen this," she said with unconscious pathos. "It has done me good. The thought of all that life and energy, here where even the memory has passed away, the quiet to which it has gone back — the disappearance of the great road, have brought home to me what a little thing one human life is. We walk in a vain shadow and disquiet ourselves in vain. I mean suffering, and being what we call unhappy, matters so little when you think how soon it will be over. That helps one to bear things."

Her eyes, misty with regret, were fixed upon the amphitheatre of rolling downs and on the green, rabbit-run turf, where once the busy highway swarmed with traffic.

He leaned towards her and spoke softly. "Thank you, dear, for trying to comfort me. I am trying to bear things, as you put it — I truly am. Most particularly because I know they are all my own fault. But I have to own that your thought brings me very little comfort. Here are you and here am I, alive and warm, wanting to enjoy our little day. The knowledge that, five centuries hence, nobody will ever have heard our names, does nothing to still my craving."

She looked at him dumbly, and her lip quivered.

"You didn't surely mean — you can't have meant that it is you — *you* who have to bear things?" he added in a hurried, choky whisper.

For the first time he saw panic in her eyes. She was staring into his as though fascinated. He could almost *see* the hasty clutch of her will upon her tongue, to prevent her making any admission. "Nobody," she said, almost inaudibly, "has more to bear than they deserve — more than they can carry; but every one has something — something, don't you think?"

He mercilessly held her gaze. "If I were to tell you what I think of you," he began; and she made a little motion with her hand.

"No, don't. Please don't. Because it really does comfort me to feel that I am only a grain of sand upon the shore of time, and that soon I shall be swept away. Only one thing matters, and that is, to have done one's best while one was here. Sometimes it seems hard, but one has to go on, one has to keep on trying. Don't you agree — oh, you must agree — that everybody has something to bear?"

"I think," he muttered savagely, "that you have always been made to bear too much. All the burdens of the whole family have rested on your little, tender shoulders. It is time that you were freed ——"

"No," she cried quickly, sharply, "that is the one thing I can never be! I have tied myself, and no human power can release me now."

Even as Gerald's blood leapt with the throb of triumph, he realised how careful he must be not to let her see the admission she had just made. The thing which he might safely say sprang into his mind as by inspiration. "There is such a thing as spiritual freedom, Virgie," he softly murmured. "Don't forget that liberty is a thing nobody can really take from you."

She turned a radiant face to him, and broke into a smile. "Oh, Gerald, how lovely! How fine of you to say that! Yes, it is so. You are right. I shall remember that always, and that it was you who said it."

"Because I am your friend," he continued steadily, knowing himself upon the right road. "Remember always that I am your friend, and that I have a right to your spiritual freedom. If ever you should be in trouble or difficulty, you will think of our friendship, won't you? Think of this perfect day, and how we have been together

in pure friendship and mutual confidence. You trust me, don't you, Virgie?"

"I should think so." She gave her hand, impulsively, and as he held it — soft, warm, and ungloved — he wondered how much more of this he could stand. She hesitated, as if she wanted to say something, and dared not. At last: "You don't want words, do you, Gerald? You understand?" she faltered.

"Yes." The word was gulped. He lifted her hand, kissed it, laid it upon her knee, and rose hurriedly. Baines had been gone nearly two hours.

"Something has delayed the car," he remarked, coming back to her, watch in hand. "I wonder what we had better do? It is getting late — you will want some dinner."

"Oh, no, I have had a very good tea," she answered calmly, "but we shall be cold if we sit here much longer."

He went into the lane and looked up and down. Then he returned again. "I wonder if the kind old lady would let you sit in her parlour while I go and reconnoitre?" he suggested. "We might go off together somewhere and get some dinner, while I station a sentry here to warn Baines where to find us? I am afraid we are a good way from anything in the way of food, but I may as well inquire."

This was agreed upon, and Virgie settled herself in a tiny parlour, full of furniture, while Gerald disappeared. She kept her ears strained for the humming of the car, but no such sound broke the pastoral silence of the remote spot. She began to wonder what they really would do should the car have broken down, for she knew that her own powers of walking were very limited, in spite of her immensely improved health.

Half an hour passed slowly, and then Gerald returned.

"There is apparently an inn of sorts at Dilvington, but a very poor one. I suppose they could give some fried

ham and potatoes. That would be better than nothing, wouldn't it?"

"How far is it?"

He studied the map. "Inside a mile."

"I think I can do that if we walk slowly."

He looked taken aback. "I say! I forgot how little you can walk!"

"Oh, I can walk a mile, but I could not do much more."

"No, by Jove, I suppose you could not. I hope I am not going to knock you up. What an ass I was to trouble about Ferris!"

She smiled bravely, and said it would be all right. The weather was lovely. Gerald laughed uncomfortably. A flurry of rain was coming up slowly from the south-west, across the heave of the downs.

They left word at the custodian's house and also at the forge, as to the direction they had taken, and walked off towards Dilvington.

Virgie came along quite bravely, but before they reached the little roadside "public" the rain had begun to fall.

Gerald ordered such food as the place afforded, and they were taken into a small and stuffy parlour, with a short, horsehair sofa, upon which the lady could rest.

"By the time we have eaten something, the car is bound to catch us up," he asserted cheerfully.

The meal took long to prepare, and was, to say the least of it, inadequate when it arrived. Hunger, however, compelled them to eat, and almost to enjoy it. By the time they had done, it was considerably later than Gerald had foreseen. In Virgie's society time had a knack of eluding him. With a hurried glance at his watch he sprang up and went out to inquire about horses.

He came back in a bustle. "They have only one horse, and she has been out all day, and is tired," said he, "but

they think she can take us as far as Fittleworth, where we can catch a train to Petworth at 9.20. We should be able to hire a car there, and get back to Worthing or, if we can't, there is a first rate inn at Petworth. No trains later than about 9.30."

"Wouldn't it be safer to wait here for our own car?" she asked doubtfully, as she gazed at the steady rain.

"Daren't risk it," he answered peremptorily. "If we had to stay the night this place is impossible. I suppose they can lend umbrellas, and you have a thick coat. They are putting in the mare now."

When the cart came round, it was found that there was not an umbrella in the house. The September night was cold, and the rain fell unrelentingly. They were very uncomfortable, and there seemed nothing to say except to wonder where Baines and the car could be. The road seemed interminable, and, as the mare ambled along like one moving in her sleep, Gerald began to betray signs of desperate impatience. As they emerged from a rough lane, upon a wider road, they heard a long, sad whistle and the sound of a train.

"I doubt ye've missed her," remarked the lad who drove.

"Impossible! Make haste!" cried Gerald with some urgency. He ordered that the drowsy steed should be whipped up, and she, indignant at such outrage when by all the rules of the game she should have been sleeping in her stable, made a wild spurt.

A quarter of a mile brought them to the little lonely station.

All was still. The lights were out. The door, when Gerald tried it, was shut. They had missed the last train.

When he came back to the side of the trap, and stood looking up at her, Virginia perceived that he was terribly

vexed. Up to this moment he had maintained a composure and cheerfulness which was reassuring. Now, he was obviously nonplussed.

In reply to questions, their driver said sullenly that it was of no use to fetch the station-master. He had gone home to bed. He couldn't make a train if there was no train. Gerald shook his cap, from the edge of which the water streamed, for the rain had become a downpour.

"One gets out of the habit of calculating distance when one is used to a car," he said to Virginia, in a voice which was an odd blend of rage and apology. "They were such a time bringing that food — we started too late. The only thing now is to go on to Pulborough, I suppose."

The lad intimated that this journey, if taken, would be made upon their own feet. The mare could do no more. She would just get home to her stable, and that was all.

Virginia could not offer to walk. She would not risk over-exertion, with her return to Gaunt so near. She tried to cheer Gerald with the reminder that, most likely, when they returned to the inn at Dilvington, they would find Baines and the car awaiting them.

As he knew this to be impossible, the thought could not console him. He climbed up at the back of the wet cart thoroughly out of temper, muttering that a wooden horse with three legs could have done two miles in three quarters of an hour.

Their discomfort was now far too great for further conversation. The rain was pitiless, and the horse-cloth over Virginia's knees, though thick, was not waterproof. Her head ached, and she was very cold, though she endured patiently, so as not to increase her companion's evidently acute sense of the pass to which he had brought her.

She felt a final lowering of her spirits when once more the comfortless inn came into sight. Their host and

hostess were apparently no more pleased to see them than were they to return. Nothing had been seen of the car, and judging from their manner, these people did not seem sure that it existed. It seemed, however, that they had half anticipated the missing of the train. The only guest bed in the house had been made up. Gerald somewhat nervously explained to the woman that Mrs. Gaunt would have this room, and he would pass the night on the horse-hair sofa in the parlour.

At first the reaction from cold and darkness was such that they found it delightful to be seated by a fire, sipping some abominable spirits and water. The circumstances, however, were too deplorable for Virginia to be able to rally her spirits. The cloak she wore was really a dust-coat, and it had not kept out the rain. She could feel that she was very wet, and was solely occupied with the consideration of how long she ought, in politeness, to sit with Gerald, and how soon she could go upstairs and take off her uncomfortable clothing.

Gerald stood, his foot on the fender, his brow contracted. His state of mind was most unenviable. He had formed this plan for the securing of Virginia's freedom; and that they should spend the night out had seemed a necessary part of the programme.

But anything like this had been far from his thoughts. How could he have been such an ass as to allow himself to miss that train? Had they caught it, all would have been well. He knew it was due at Petworth just late enough to make it certain that they would miss the last train. Then they would have been safe in the warmth and comfort of a first-rate inn. The worst aspect of it all was that to Virginia, to whom nothing could be explained, he must seem merely a hopeless bungler, a person unable to manage a simple expedition like this.

"Need I say," he began, after a longish silence, "that

I am repenting in dust and ashes? I am so sorry for such an atrocious muddle. What can I do to help you through with it? Draw your chair close to the fire. Might I be privileged to take off your shoes?"

"No, thanks, I will do that when I get upstairs," said Virginia wearily. "I don't feel inclined to sit up."

"But the car may turn up at any moment," he urged, hating himself for his deceit.

"Why, so it may; we could get home then," she replied, with a dawning of hope. "You see, I have to travel to-morrow; it is so inconvenient for me to be detained, that is why I am so grumpy!"

He renewed his apologies, and she asked him to talk about something else. He made a hesitating attempt to revert to the key in which they had conversed at Bignor; but obtained no response from her. At last, after another long silence, he could bear it no longer, but went down on his knees beside her. and cried impulsively: "Virgie, you must forgive me! Don't be so unhappy, dear!"

She had been lost in the mazes of her own thoughts, which wandered always to Gaunt and her return to Omberleigh. She turned to Rosenberg with a start, and said hurriedly: "Oh, don't! What are you talking of? Get up, those people might come in."

The words were hasty, the tone so void of all warmth, all friendliness, that it froze the genial current of his soul into something like consternation. If the result of his escapade was to be that Virgie took a dislike to him, things were indeed hopeless. She rose, and picked up her steaming shoes.

"Good night! I am going upstairs to lie down. If the car comes, you must call me."

He made no objection at all, but held open the door in silence.

The ungracious woman, summoned from the kitchen

in the act of yawning prodigiously, ushered her into a room as cold as a well, with a mingled perfume of pomatum and apple-garret which turned her what Tony would have described as "niffy." She took off her skirt, and asked that it might be hung before the kitchen fire. She could not, however, undress, since she had with her no necessaries for the night, and the landlady volunteered no assistance.

She lay down in wretched discomfort, thinking that Gerald downstairs, with a fire, had far the best of the bargain; but she was determined not to go down to him. Until the last quarter of an hour, though she was acutely alive to the inconvenience of the situation, it had not struck her as awkward. Now this aspect had presented itself, and she felt a new mental disquiet which greatly increased her physical suffering. In view of her late ill-health, and the care which her husband had exercised in order that she might recover completely, the accident was most unfortunate. From that point of view, if from no other, she felt certain of Gaunt's displeasure; and a creeping terror, vague and formless, prevented her from resting. She hardly slept until after dawn, when she dropped into heavy sleep, only to wake, affrighted, about seven with a sore throat and a burning forehead.

She sat up, dizzy and sick. Yet if there was one thing more certain than another, it was that she could not possibly stay where she was. Somehow or other she must get back to Worthing at once, even though she could not stand upon her feet.

She flung herself out of bed, animated with the strength of desperation. Peering into the small, cracked mirror, she was encouraged by finding that she did not look ill. Her temperature was, as a matter of fact, 101, and her colour was the flush of fever, but she did not know that.

There was no bell in her wretched room, and she had

to call repeatedly before she could make anybody hear. At last the woman appeared, and she begged soap, hot water and a towel. After a long interval, an earthenware jug, containing about a pint of liquid, was produced. With this, and a tiny comb which she kept in her vanity bag, she made what toilette she could.

It was somewhat consoling to find a good fire burning, and a cloth spread for breakfast, when she crawled downstairs, stiff and aching. Gerald had gone out for news of the car, and presently returned with milk, butter and eggs, neither of which commodities seemed to be kept in stock at the inn. He had found at Bignor a telegram from Baines, announcing a bad breakdown, but saying he hoped to be along at about 9.30. Gerald had left instructions for him to come on straight to the inn at Dilvington; and, with a great assumption of cheerfulness, hoped that their troubles were over.

Virginia hardly answered him. In spite of her desire that he should not know how ill she felt, she found it impossible to keep up appearances, and could not eat. He attributed all to her sense of the unpleasant position in which she found herself. He was acutely conscious of the fact that the car, when it arrived, would bring Ferris with it; and he now felt himself an unutterable hound to have consented to such a plan.

At a few minutes to ten, the welcome horn was heard. The girl's eyes cleared a little, she rose, and eagerly put on her hat and coat, filled with the one wish to be out of the place and away. She was at the door when the motor appeared; and as it came to a stop, she started and shrank back with a momentary loss of self-control. She had quite forgotten Ferris.

Though he had plotted and arranged the moment, Gerald was hatefully embarrassed now that it was upon him. There was a knowing, confidential flavour about Ferris's

manner which was detestable. He seemed to be metaphorically winking at Gerald, who believed he would have done it actually, could he have caught his eye when Mrs. Gaunt was not looking.

To Virginia a new thought presented itself. Since Ferris was here, and saw their plight — since he knew they had been there all night — he would, of course, tell Gaunt. This necessitated her telling her husband herself the whole vexatious story — a feat of daring which it made her head swim to contemplate.

She hardly spoke to Ferris, but entered the car without delay.

Gerald did all he could. In view of what he knew her opinion of Percy to be, he would not sit beside Baines, but came inside with them; and was obliged to accommodate himself on the small seat in front, doubled up with his knees almost to his chin, unable to smoke, restless and irritable.

At first he was almost angry with Virginia. She might buck up and help him to carry off these infernally awkward moments. Her listless silence was the worst demeanour she could possibly assume. As the miles passed, he became aware that she was feeling physically ill, and remorse made him frantic.

Oh, damn the whole thing! He had done what he was ashamed of, blundered unpardonably; and, as far as he could see, he would gain nothing by it. . . . One idea gave him some consolation. If Virginia were really ill — if the doctor could be persuaded to keep her in bed for some days — then Ferris would go back to Derbyshire with his tale; and it was dimly possible that Virginia might never return thither at all.

CHAPTER XXIII

TEMPTATION

"I would not if I might
Rebuild my house of lies, wherein I joyed
One time to dwell: my soul shall walk in white
Cast down, but not destroyed."— CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

It may seem a curious thing that Mrs. Mynors, dependent upon the bounty of Osbert Gaunt, should be so ready to consent to a plan which, if successful, might once more cast her penniless upon the world. She herself was at a loss to understand the true meaning of the malice which actuated her. In all her life she had hitherto never known the strength of any passion. She was incapable of deep love, of real suffering. Her maternal instinct was not strongly developed, and selfishness had, up to now, preserved her from anything more disturbing than temper or discomfort.

The first emotion of compelling force which had ever gripped her was the desire for revenge, which took its rise upon the day she went to meet her old lover at the club, carefully adorned for conquest, and received from him so unexpected a slap in the face. So unused was she to be dominated by any overmastering emotion that she was being run away with; and now and then by fits and starts she saw with dismay that this was so. She reassured herself however. Like most women who have always been attractive to the male, she overrated her own powers. She believed that Gerald Rosenberg was her

slave. As a son-in-law he would be quite ideal, and unable to refuse her anything. She could not deny Gaunt's generosity; but he, although spending large sums when he believed it necessary, was severe upon luxury; he hated the wasting of pence; whereas Gerald was always giving presents of the kind she welcomed and understood — cut flowers, places at the theatre, pretty trifles — to her, to Tony, to Pansy, even to Virginia. She was convinced that her influence was paramount with Gerald, and, if with him, then with his father also.

After all, he was the only son; the old man could not afford to be implacable. Socially, her daughter was more than his equal. Her superficial mind glossed over such ugly facts as divorce. Everybody did such things nowadays, and everybody could be told the true story of this particular case. Gerald and Virginia were blameless; the mistake had been in the hasty, ill-considered marriage; Gaunt would have to own himself beaten. She sometimes pictured an interview between herself and Gaunt, wherein she would nobly repudiate his gross insinuations, and speak beautifully of her daughter's angelic innocence.

Seldom had she been more gratified by anything than by the task which fell to her of writing to "dear Osbert" to explain that Virginia had caught a chill, and would not be able to travel for some days. She used the term "days," much as she longed to write "weeks"; for there was one possibility which she kept ever before her eyes, and that was the fear lest Gaunt should lose patience, and come to Worthing himself.

Virgie's feverish attack suited her plan so well that she could not blame Gerald for his carelessness, though she privately thought he had badly mismanaged things.

Virgie indeed was feeling downright ill, and had such a splitting headache that, upon hearing that Gaunt was duly informed of her illness, she abandoned the effort

of writing to him herself, and merely lay still, feeling in every aching bone the relief of a few days' respite before taking the final step.

Grover received her in a state of queer agitation, and was half inclined to pet and pity, half to blame. The good woman had been very uncertain in her moods ever since they came to Worthing. Her heart was jealous for the lonely man in Derbyshire. She saw well enough what were Mr. Rosenberg's feelings, and she felt convinced that Mrs. Mynors was also well aware of them. She was indignant that the pretty woman, whom she cordially hated, should allow such freedom of intercourse.

When the couple failed to return, or even to telegraph, the previous night, Grover had gone through some awful moments. The thought "They're off!" flashed through her mind, in spite of her real attachment to her young mistress. She was so relieved when they returned that, like many people in like case, she felt she must scold a little.

"Don't tell me! England's a place where there's railway stations and where there's telegraph offices," said she severely. "If the last train had gone before you got to the station, I suppose there was a village near, and where there's a village, there's a telegraph. The young man could have knocked up the postmaster, couldn't he?"

"I dare say; I never thought of that. I was so sure we should find the motor when we got back to the inn. Oh, it was such a horrid place, Grover, and so uncomfortable. The woman was so disagreeable, and seemed never to have heard of anybody wanting hot water to wash with!"

"Serve you right, I'd say, that I would, if it wasn't for your being so poorly. After all the care the master took of you! After his standing to one side and denying himself even the sight of your face, so as you should

get well quicker. If he was to see the way you carry on here among them all! At everybody's beck and call! Fetch and carry, first here, then there. Fine and pleased he'd be, wouldn't he?"

"Oh, Grover, but I have been so well until this happened! And how could I help it? Here are you, cross old thing, scolding me in the same breath, first for taking a chill, and then because I didn't stay pottering out in the rain still longer, hunting for a telegraph office. The horse was dead beat; she couldn't go any farther."

"If I could box Mr. Rosenberg's ears, I'd do it with pleasure," was Grover's vindictive reply, somewhat qualified by the extreme tenderness with which she handled the culprit, undressing, tending, soothing her, and laying her down among her pillows to rest.

"Men don't think of things," murmured Virgie weakly, feeling bound to excuse Gerald.

"There's one that does," was the immediate retort. "One that has never had anything to do with ladies, all the time I've known him, till now, but has shown more true consideration than any one of these young fancy men, thinking of nothing but their own pleasure."

Virgie coloured painfully and was silent. This subject was taboo between mistress and maid. Grover could not but know that Virginia was in mortal fear of her husband, and the good woman regretted the man's awkward shyness, which prevented him, as she thought, from making headway. Her mind was filled with keen anxiety lest all the hopes entertained by the household at Omberleigh should be brought to naught by this unnatural separation of the newly wed.

No more was said; and later in the day the maid bitterly regretted having said even so much, for Mrs. Gaunt's fever mounted, and by the night she was delirious.

. . . . . .

It seemed to the patient a long time afterwards, though in reality not more than forty-eight hours, when she awoke from a sound sleep, and, glancing round, found the curtains drawn, excluding the sunshine, and her mother seated by her bed.

Mrs. Mynors looked up with an angelic smile when the sleeper stirred, rose and came to the bedside, stooping over her with a look of pity and sympathy.

"Oh, how long have I slept?" said Virginia, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Where's Grover, mamma? I must get up and be off. I am going back to Omberleigh to-day."

"Not to-day, my sweetest," was the murmured reply. "The doctor would not allow that."

"Oh, but Osbert is expecting me; he will be vexed." She put her hand to her head.

"Lie down, darling; you must not exert yourself. You are weak. Osbert knows. It is all right."

Virginia, conscious of a swimming in her head, though the pain was gone, subsided upon her pillows.

"Oh, mamma, how tiresome! How very tiresome!" she faltered. "I have been away so long; I must go back!"

"My dearest, my most precious child, don't grieve yourself! It is all right! You are with those that love you, and will take care of you," was the cooing answer. "There is no need for fear, my Virgie."

"It isn't fear. It is breaking my word," stammered the girl, knowing that her words sounded like nonsense, but feeling explanation too difficult.

Mrs. Mynors, without speaking, brought her a cup of strong broth which was keeping warm over a little lamp.

"I have sent that poor, good Grover out for a walk," said she. "She is not as young as she was, and the nursing has tired her. But I had another reason for sending

her away when you should wake. I wanted to be alone with you."

She did not say this until the soup had been drunk, and Virginia felt refreshed.

"Why, mamma?"

Her mother sank to her knees beside the bed, holding her hand. "My darling," said she, half sobbing, "there is no more need for concealment between your mother and you. When you were delirious I sat beside you — I had to listen to what you said — and I know — I know your pitiful secret."

There was a long, deep silence. At last Virginia spoke.

"Mother, tell me what you mean. What do you know?"

"I know that Osbert has been cruel to you. I know that you go in fear of his cruelty," came the whispered answer.

There was another silence. "Well, mamma, if that were true? I do not say it is true, but if it were, what then?"

"What then? Why, Virgie, then you must be rescued from him. He must be a madman if he could ill-treat you, and the law will protect you against him."

For a moment the eyes of the girl in the bed lit up with a flaming hope. For a moment she turned to her mother with a rush of eager, palpitating confidence. Then a new look crossed her face, which grew composed and firm. Her voice was not sad, but steady as she replied: "I have sworn."

"Sworn, Virgie? Darling, what do you mean by that?"

"I have sworn to love him," was the answer. "I am his wife."

"But, Virginia, if he has failed to keep his oath?"

"You think that absolves me from keeping mine?"

There was a faint smile on the girl's lips, and her mother thought, as she so often did, that she never as long as she lived should understand her daughter.

"But, of course, dear, you are under no obligation to endure cruelty. The law ——"

Virginia raised herself upon her elbow. "I *am* under an obligation to endure it," she replied. "I have sworn to love him, and while he wishes me to be with him, I shall be with him. He has done all he undertook to do. He has done more. He has not only given you comfort and security, not only provided funds for this marvellous cure of Pansy's; he has let me come to you, and stay all this time, because he trusted me. He knew I should go back, because I have promised to do so. I am going back."

"Dear one, we will not argue," was the gentle response after a pause, during which the elder lady decided to change her tactics. "You are weak as yet, and must rest and grow strong. Thank God you need not decide at once, since the doctor would most certainly not sanction your travelling at present. I only touched upon this painful subject, because I wanted you to know that, without any treachery to Osbert, you have inadvertently allowed me to know how things stand between you and him, so there is no need for further concealment. You may rest safely in the knowledge that you have loving guardians who will not let you suffer from the caprice of a perverted mind."

"How long have I been ill?" asked Virginia, after a pause.

"This is Monday. You got home on Friday."

After a few minutes' silence, the invalid asked in her usual tones for news of Pansy and Tony. Pansy was wonderfully well. The air of Worthing was doing for her even more than the doctors expected. It was at the

request of Dr. Danby that they had come to Worthing. He had a friend in practice there, in whose skill and kindness he had the utmost confidence. Pansy adored her new doctor, and the electric baths were proving a great success. Tony was out a great deal with his friend Mullins. Gerald had gone to town, but was coming down on Wednesday.

A tap on the door announced the doctor's visit. He was pleased to find the patient so much improved.

"When shall I be able to travel?" she asked him.

"Oh, some time next week, I hope," he answered comfortably.

Mrs. Mynors looked triumphant. She went out of the room with the doctor, and Virginia was left to her own reflections.

"*The caprice of a perverted mind!*" That phrase stuck in her head. It seemed to her that it did just exactly describe Gaunt's conduct. It is possible, however, that a perverted mind may be put right again, if it encounters some agency sufficiently powerful. When she was in town Dr. Danby had spoken to her of her husband.

"He was one of the most interesting boys I ever saw," had been his verdict. "I was very sorry for him. He was thoroughly mishandled, misunderstood, by the old ladies, his great-aunts, who were all the kith and kin he had."

(I can believe anything of them. They put the Chippendale in the attic, and furnished their dining-room in horsehair and mahogany, had been Virginia's inward comment.)

"I saw him several times during his university period. The authorities there thought as highly of him as I did. Then came the *débâcle*. Some girl, upon whom he fixed all his heart, failed him. He could not stand it. The weak spot in his nature was touched — his fatal tendency

to concentrate violently upon one object. He went all to pieces for a while — dashed off abroad — and I lost touch with him."

It seemed to the girl, who revolved this information in her mind, that her own duty lay clear. If she could but overcome his prejudice, his perverted idea of her, might she not do something after all towards making him happy?

Mims had once praised her for her inveterate habit of doing her duty. Easy enough had duty been when it was a case of Pansy and Tony. Now because duty was formidable and difficult, was she to shrink from it? She covered her face with her hands, she stopped her ears against an imaginary voice. She would go back — she must go back.

But if Gerald joined in the argument, would she be able to resist?

Well she knew her mother, and she was positive that, being on such terms of confidence as she had lately established with young Rosenberg, she would tell him what she had inadvertently learned, of the true inwardness of Virginia's marriage. At the mere thought the girl writhed.

She was going back, whatever they said, whatever they did. She must and would go back, in fulfilment of her promise. Yet her mind was racked with the conflict. If she went back, if she entered the Beast's den a second time, it was final. Suppose the worst were to prove true? Suppose that nothing she could do would disarm Gaunt, that he persisted in his hate, that he took delight in thwarting her, bullying her, frightening her? How vilely so ever he used her, *still she would have to be his wife.* He would shut her up in captivity, keep her from those she loved — and yet she would have to be his wife!

Could she bear it?

She remembered her own boast: "You can cut me to

pieces with a knife if you choose, when I come back. Anything, if you will let me go to Pansy!"

Well, he had let her go. He had performed that, as he had performed his half of all points in the bargain between them. She, so far, had performed nothing at all. She had spent his money freely, and had lived away from him. Was her wild promise nothing but an empty boast, after all? Was she content to take these favours she had wrung from him, but to refuse to pay when pay-day came round?

All at once she knew that her mind was made up. She was going back.

She bounded out of bed, but soon found, when standing up, that she was far from fit to travel that day. She succeeded, however, in finding a writing block and a pencil, and returning to bed wrote a hasty line to Gaunt. In it she said only that she had had a tiresome chill, but that she was almost well, and intended to reach home without fail on Wednesday.

Her mother returned to the room just as she had sealed and stamped the letter.

"Good child!" said she, smiling, "I was just about to suggest that you should send Osbert a line to keep him quiet. You have told him what the doctor said, about hoping that you could travel next week?"

"I have told him I cannot travel to-day," replied Virginia; and Mrs. Mynors carried off the letter to post.

CHAPTER XXIV

ESCAPE

"But next day passed, and next day yet
With still some cause to wait one day more."
— Robert Browning.

When Grover presently entered her room with lunch, Virginia was quick to perceive an estrangement. The woman's face was set in stern lines, and her eyes were cast down, except at such moments as she fancied that Virginia was not looking, when she sent furtive, searching glances at the wistful face upon the pillow.

Virginia wondered what had happened, but felt too languid to inquire, dreading that some kind of a scene might follow. By degrees she gathered, more from hint than direct speech, that the main grievance was being turned out of the room during the two nights of delirium.

After what her mother had just revealed, of her unconscious ravings, she could not but be thankful that Grover had not heard them. She did not know of the short dialogue which took place between the two deadly enemies, outside her door that morning.

Mrs. Mynors had arisen from the sofa and gone out to speak to Grover, who was in waiting outside with the early tea for her mistress, Virginia being still asleep.

"I hope Mrs. Gaunt's better, ma'am?" Grover asked, with prim frigidity.

"Better? Poor unhappy child! It might be better for her perhaps if there were no chance of her recovery," was the unlooked-for reply, delivered with exaggerated emphasis.

"Indeed, ma'am?"

"Yes, indeed, and indeed! God help her, poor innocent lamb! You need not think to keep anything dark in future, you and your wretched master! In her delirium the unhappy creature has let out everything. And you — you must have known! You who came here with her as his spy! Mounting guard over her night and day, lest she should let her people know of his diabolical cruelty. I have outwitted you, and now I know everything. I shall find means to protect my injured child!"

"I have no idea what you mean, ma'am," replied Grover, inflexibly respectful.

"Oh, no, of course not! You may as well drop the mask. I know you, and I know him," was the instant retort, as Mrs. Mynors, in her elegant wrapper, disappeared into her own room.

Grover went about all that day racking her brains as to what she ought to do. She was quite confident that she had been turned out of the room in order that these revelations — in which she did not believe — might be made, or be said to have been made. They were part, she was sure, of some plot or scheme which was being hatched. Ought she to write to Mr. Gaunt, and tell him that she thought he had better come to Worthing and take his wife home? She was a slow-witted, but very sensible woman, and she feared that, should she take such a course, Gaunt might fear that things were more serious than they actually were. Yet she distrusted Mrs. Mynors profoundly, and watched her as closely as she could. She overheard her say to the doctor, outside Virginia's room:

"She ought to be kept very quiet; her nerves are all wrong. Mind you make her stay in bed as long as you can. Don't let her think of travelling till next week at the soonest."

She also saw her come out of the sick-room with the

letter just written by Virginia to Gaunt in her hand. She carried it into her own room, and something in the way she looked at it produced in Grover an overpowering impression that she did not mean to forward it.

With a determination to ascertain, the woman knocked at the door some minutes later, and was sure she heard the rustle of paper and the hasty closing of a drawer before Mrs. Mynors told her to come in.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but should I take Mrs. Gaunt's letter to post? It's almost time."

"Thanks, I have just sent it off."

This made the servant certain that her suspicion was correct. She went slowly into Virginia's room, more and more perplexed as to what she ought to do, and wondering what were her mistress's own feelings in the matter. Since the Bignor episode, she had been so shaken in her faith in Virginia that she was half ready to believe that it was a case of like mother, like daughter, and that the dainty butterfly would never return to gloomy Omberleigh. The idea filled her with resentment. "His fault," she muttered to herself. "Such a place, enough to give you a fit of the blues, dirty and dull and drab; he ought to have had it all done up for her — make her think that he wanted to please her! He don't know enough to go indoors when it rains, not where a woman's concerned, that's very certain. But, oh, gracious goodness, what will happen to him if she turns out a light one? It's my belief he'd never stand it. He'd go mad or cut his throat."

Gloomily she ran ribbons into under-linen, made the bed, and went about her usual sick-room duties. All the time she was wondering whether she could not "say something." The difficulty lay in thinking what to say.

Virginia was very quiet — unusually so. When Grover had gone out, she locked the door, put on a dressing-

gown, and sat up by the fire. She found herself stronger than she had thought. Her fever having passed, she was all right. She was certain that there was no reason why she should not travel on Wednesday; but she determined to say nothing about it to her mother.

When next Mrs. Mynors came in to see her, she was lying with eyes half closed, and whispered that she felt very weak, and was not equal to talking. This was satisfactory, and the visitor crept away.

Next morning the girl, with the elasticity of youth, awoke feeling very much better. Grover could not but remark it. Yet, when her mother came in, she was languid and monosyllabic.

She could not, however, escape a renewal of the bombardment of yesterday, with regard to her return to Omberleigh. Mrs. Mynors brought in her work after lunch, and attacked the subject with determination. She was met with a meekness which surprised her. Virginia owned that she was at present too unwell to face anything difficult — to undergo any trying experience. Next week it would be different. She thought they might postpone serious discussion. The wind was somewhat taken out of her opponent's sails, but there was no doubt this depression and invalidism was satisfactory in her eyes. She made, as she thought, quite certain that her daughter had no intention of travelling at present.

"I'm sure Osbert does not expect me. He has not written at all. He is waiting to hear again, I suppose."

"Not written! When I told him how ill you are! Oh, Virgie, what a brute the man is!"

The speaker omitted to mention that in her letter to her son-in-law she had begged him not to write to Virgie, as his letters "agitated her unaccountably," and that she herself had heard from him that morning to the effect that he hoped a doctor had been called in.

She went away after a while, and wrote to Gerald in town.

"I think there is no doubt she is growing to see that we are right," she wrote. "I am letting her come along at her own pace. The discovery that we know her secret has shaken her, and she has at least given up all idea of travelling at present. That being so, I shall run up to town to-morrow morning, as there are several things I must do. You and I can return here together in the evening. I will come up by the early express, and if you were to take tickets for the matinée at the Criterion, I should not object. One gets so bored here with invalids all day."

. . . . . .

That night when Grover came into the room to make the final arrangements, she found Mrs. Mynors there, in the act of saying good night to a limp and disconsolate daughter.

"I am running up to town on business by the 8:4 to-morrow, Grover," said she, turning round with that alarming sweetness which convinced the hearer that some demand upon her good-nature would be immediately made. "I wonder whether, while you are making Mrs. Gaunt's tea to-morrow morning, you would bring me a cup; these lodging-house people are so disagreeable about a little thing like that! Bring it at seven o'clock sharp, if you would be so kind."

"Very well, mum," replied Grover in her gruffest tones, which were very gruff indeed.

"Good-bye, my precious; rest well," murmured the lady, bending over the bed. "We shall cheer up when Gerald comes back, and if you are very good I will beg the doctor to let you get up on Thursday."

"If I feel well enough," sighed Virginia, closing her eyes.

Grover felt all her distrust reviving. She was certain that Virgie was feeling almost completely recovered. Was there anything up? Some plot? Had young Rosenberg planned for the mother to be away in town while he came down here and carried off Virginia in his car?

She turned from the closing of the door upon Mrs. Mynors' exit, with a very grim mouth. The patient was sitting bolt upright in bed, with an expression so changed, so alert, that she paused just where she stood, in amazement.

"Grover," panted the girl, in a shaken, excited voice, "come here; I want to speak to you."

Grover approached, slowly and doubtfully, suspicion written all over her. When she was quite near, Virginia drew her down so that she sat upon the bed, and put her arms round her, laying her head upon a singularly unresponsive bosom.

"Grover, I want you to help me," she whispered. "I am going to do something desperate — something secret — and I can't do it unless you stand by me."

The woman paused. She was angry with herself for being influenced, as influenced she undoubtedly was, by the clinging arms, and the nestling golden head. "Now, what have you got in your head, ma'am?" she asked, as coldly as she could. She almost jumped when she heard the reply.

"I want you to help me run away."

"Never!" Putting aside the girlish embrace, she rose to her feet, her homely face stern and reproachful. "Never! Not while I'm in his service! He may have scared you, as your mother tells me he has, but if so, you should have known better. It's only because you know so little of him, and he so unused to women. Oh, my dear, my dear, I don't suppose for a minute you'll listen

to me, but I must say it! You go back, my dear, and do your duty! Your place is there, with him! You chose him, and it's God's law that you should cleave to him, though I have no right to be talking like this, ma'am, but if it was the last word I ever said ——"

"Grover, Grover," cried Virginia, grasping a solid arm and shaking it, "what on earth are you talking about? Isn't that just what I want you to do? To take me back to Omberleigh? What did you think I meant?"

Grover's face was a study. It was as though layer after layer of gloom and apprehension passed from its surface.

"That what you mean? Run away *home?*" she panted.

"To Omberleigh, yes." She could not bring her lips to utter the word *home,* but Grover did not remark such a detail, though Gaunt had noted it fast enough in the letter she wrote him the previous week.

"I don't know whether it is that my chill has made me a little mad," whispered Virgie, "but I feel as if I am in prison. I feel as if they had made up their minds that I should not go back, and you know I must. I have overstayed my time already."

"Well, ma'am, if that's what you want, to go back where you belong, you shall go, though an army stood in the way," cried Grover, with such goodwill that Virgie flung her arms round her again, this time to meet with a warm response. Then she slid out of bed, and stood, her arms outstretched, making graceful motions to show that she was strong and vigorous.

"I am a horrid little cheat," she said, smiling. "I am afraid I tried to make mother think I was feeling very bad, so that she might not be afraid to go off by the early train and leave me! Grover, I have looked up all the trains. You must pack to-night, and we can get to

town by one o'clock. We must go straight through; there is a train with a dining-car, getting us to Derby at 6:34, and we can wire for the car to meet us. I hope I am not being very silly, but it seems to me the only way to get free of it all. Another thing is the parting from Pansy. I shall go without saying anything at all to her, and leave a letter for her. She is so happy here, she will not really miss me, and it will save her a bad fit of crying if I slip away. Me, too, for that matter," she added, colouring. "I can't help feeling the parting, you know, Grover."

"That I well believe, ma'am, but it is for a time. She is doing so nicely that she will be able to come to Omberleigh before long, and think how she will enjoy lying on the terrace and playing with Cosmo and Damian."

Virgie had to laugh, though a pang shot through her heart. Little did this good, loyal Grover know the dreadful truth!

At the thought of the malice that awaited her, the unknown suffering in store, she flinched, and for a moment felt faint. Then she rallied.

This precipitate flight was, she knew, her only chance of preserving her self-respect. When Gerald returned, it would all be different somehow. Now, before she had time to think, she must make her dash for duty. What she had said in her delirium she knew not; but she knew well enough that, during those confidential moments, seated in the field below the Roman Villa, she had admitted her marital unhappiness, and that Gerald had understood.

"I can't understand one thing," she said, as she lay watching Grover draw out her trunk, open it, and begin her packing methodically. "And that is, why Mr. Gaunt has not written to me since I took my chill."

"I think I can tell you, ma'am. It is because your letters to him have been stopped."

"Grover!"

"If, when we get home, ma'am, you find that he has had the letter you wrote this afternoon, why, I'll beg your mamma's pardon for what I have said. But I am sure she opened it, and I don't believe she ever sent it to post. Another thing, ma'am. Muriel (the lodging-house maid) told me that Mrs. Mynors had a letter with the Manton postmark yesterday. Why didn't she tell you she had heard?"

"I thought it so strange he did not write," said Virgie, knitting puzzled brows. "But, Grover, they have no right to do such things! Even if mamma thinks, as she seems to think, that he — Mr. Gaunt — is not — I mean, if she does not like him, and does not want me to go away, she has no right to tamper with letters, do you think?"

"It's not for me, ma'am, to pass any remarks upon what your mamma does. But I think it *is* for me to let you know she done it," replied Grover, with demure emphasis. Virgie could not help smiling, in spite of her tumultuous emotions.

Grover proved a most able accomplice and conspirator. She duly brought tea to Mrs. Mynors next morning, and said, in subdued tones, that Mrs. Gaunt had not passed a very good night. She was now sleeping, and had better not be disturbed. Would Mrs. Mynors mind slipping downstairs without coming into her room?

This had the desired effect. The elder Virginia departed for her little jaunt to town — travelling by the first-class-only express — with a perfectly serene mind. Virginia the younger was, she felt convinced, wholly contented with her bed for that day. Grover meanwhile

completed her preparations with the utmost composure. She went down, paid the landlady, and explained to her that Mrs. Gaunt was called home unexpectedly, and wanted to slip away without distressing the little lady.

Noiselessly the trunks were carried downstairs, noiselessly though, with beating heart, Virginia followed. It was not until Worthing was left behind; not, indeed, until they had passed, safe and unrecognised, through London, that she could relax the tension of her will.

Now the die was cast. She had chosen. She was doing what she firmly believed to be right. Once before, when in straits, she had taken a way out which seemed the only way, but which she yet knew to be unworthy of her. Now she was blindly doing the hard thing because it was the right thing. The consequences were not in her hands.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RETURN

"With all my will, but much against my heart,
We two now part.
My very Dear,
Our solace is, the sad road lies so clear.
It needs no art,
With faint, averted feet, and many a tear,
In our opposed paths to persevere.
Go thou to East, I West, we will not say
There's any hope, it is so far away."— COVENTRY PATMORE.

THE rain which had so interfered with Rosenberg's plans, and spoiled the close of the motoring day, seemed to mark also the end of summer. The weather ever since had been grey and autumnal. In Derbyshire the change was more marked than in Sussex. A wild wind moaned in the black pines of Omberleigh, and brown leaves drifted upon the blast as Gaunt rode forth to Sessions that Wednesday morning.

His mood was one not only of depression, but of anxiety. He hardly realised how much he had built upon Virginia's cheering accounts of her own restored health, until he received his mother-in-law's feline epistle, telling him of a severe chill and consequent fever. The wording was careful, even clever, but she had conveyed with full force the impression that she meant to convey, which was that the fever and delirium were more the result of distress of mind than of the actual chill — that the prospect of returning to her loveless marriage and gloomy

home were working untold harm to the patient, and hindering recovery.

Since the receipt of this most disquieting letter, no word from Worthing had reached him. Morning after morning the empty postbag mocked him. To-day he was making up his mind that if he held to his resolution, and remained silent — if he adhered to his foolhardy determination to prove his wife to the uttermost — he would lose her altogether.

He still told himself that she would do her duty at all costs. He was, however, beginning to perceive that the strength of influence now being brought to bear might succeed in persuading her that to return to him was *not* her duty. After all — in view of what he had made her bear — could he say that he thought it was her duty?

Mrs. Mynors spoke as though the illness were serious. He knew she was a liar; he knew she wished to hurt him. Yet, after all, it might be true. He had dwelt such a blow at Virgie's tenderest feelings as might well shock a sensitive girl into real illness. Neither had he done anything, since they parted, to allay her fears. He had not so much as suggested the change of heart which awaited her. As the date of her return drew near — as she contemplated the renewal of her martyrdom — her flesh might well shrink from the demand made upon it by the dauntless spirit.

Violently though he struggled against indulging hope, it had all the same risen insurgent when he got Virginia's letter fixing Saturday as the date of her return. He had lain sleepless most of Friday night, planning what he could do, or say, when they met at the railway station; living over again his drive at her side, through the summer dusk, on the night of her departure when she had been, in her absorption, hardly conscious of his presence. He wondered whether he could break through the tongue-

tied gloom which held him like an evil spell, and let her see something — not too much at first — of what he felt.

His mortification when he received his mother-in-law's wounding letter had been proportionately great. The intensity of his feeling surprised and half frightened him.

Since that dark moment — silence.

He rode into town in a mood which alternated between something which was a colourable imitation of despair and a haunting notion that perhaps some letter or telegram might be awaiting him when he returned home in the evening. There was much business to transact that day. It was half-past four before he was free; and as he walked along the High Street, making for the inn where his horse was put up, he came face to face with Ferris.

"Ha, Gaunt, how goes it?" cried Percy, wringing his hand with effusion, proud that the passers-by should see him on such terms with Gaunt of Omberleigh. "Not looking very fit — what? Why don't you run down to Worthing for the week-end and give your wife a surprise? Do you good. Well, I can give you the latest news of her. Been down there myself, staying over Sunday with Rosenberg at the Beauséjour."

"You have?" Gaunt's tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. He could not own that he himself had no news of Virginia.

"Yes, not a bad little hole, Worthing. Plenty of sun and sea air and so on. Think it might suit Joey and the kids for a month or two, later on. Pity Mrs. Gaunt knocked up, wasn't it, though?"

"Yes, I was very much vexed to hear it," Gaunt was able by this to reply with his natural brevity.

"Enough to make her, though, wasn't it? Pretty bad generalship on Rosenberg's part. You take my tip and run down, Gaunt. They tell me she's deuced seedy." There was meaning in the tone.

"She makes light of it to me," said Gaunt, choosing his line quickly. "Tell me what you know of it."

"Oh, well, of course, you heard that she got wet through, driving in an open cart in the pouring rain late at night, trying to reach Petworth in time for the last train, or something. Of course, Rosenberg's car is a beauty; you couldn't expect it to break down like that . . . still, to send off his chauffeur to meet me at Chichester, leaving himself and Mrs. Gaunt stranded in a place where there was no accommodation, no telegraph — gad, if you had seen the hovel where they spent the night, Gaunt, I think you'd have given him a bit of the rough side of your tongue."

"The same idea has occurred to me," said Gaunt drily, "but I understood that the whole thing could not be avoided; it was quite an accident. Still, to drive her in the wet, without even an umbrella — no wonder my wife fell ill!" There was a certain relief in his heart, among all the turmoil of jealousy and vexation. The circumstances were, in themselves, quite enough to account for illness, without his own shortcomings being in any way responsible.

"You see, she had nothing for the night," explained Ferris, "so I suppose she couldn't take off her wet things. I had a line from Rosenberg this morning about the directors' meeting, and he mentioned that the doctor won't let her leave her room."

"So I understood. I think I had better take your advice and run down. Thank you, Ferris. I am glad to have seen you. My mother-in-law has the art of making the most of things, and I was not sure just how unwell my wife is."

After the exchange of a few commonplaces, they parted. Ferris watched Gaunt limp into the inn yard, and turned away with an involuntary, "Poor devil!" He stood

irresolute upon the pavement for a minute or two, then strolled into the post office, and wrote a telegram to Rosenberg:

Gaunt coming down. Be on your guard.

He was eager to stand well with both parties, and this was his idea of accomplishing such object.

. . . . . .

Never had the avenue which led to his own housedoor seemed to Gaunt so wild, so desolate, as when he rode up it this evening. The sun was already setting, gleaming fierce and threatening red through the purple ragged clouds which all day long had veiled it.

He knew that everything was over, but he also knew that to be any longer passive was beyond him. He was going to London at once, by that same late train from Derby which had taken her from him. To sleep in a bed this night would be insupportable. If he were in the train he would feel that he was not wasting hours of enforced inaction. He would be in London in time to take an early train to Worthing, and he would arrive there during the morning, and ascertain his exact fate.

Now he knew how firmly he had built upon the idea of Virginia's faith. In the depths of his twisted, shrunken, yet living heart, he had been certain that she would keep her word. He still believed that she would have kept it, had not revelation come to her. She and Rosenberg having discovered the feeling which existed between them, how could she come back to her nominal husband with a lie upon her lips?

As soon as she was well enough, she meant to write and explain. He was sure of that. He kept insisting upon it, in his mind. He would save her that effort. He would go to her and make things as easy as he could.

He would explain that he knew himself to have forfeited all claim.

His horse's hoofs were beating to the refrain: "All over! All over!"

What a fool he had made himself over the redecorating of that room! That room which from henceforth no human foot would enter. Only the previous night he had sat there for a couple of hours, playing upon the new piano he had bought for her, and conjuring up the picture of her, outlined against the delicate ivory walls, each tint of her faint sea-shell colouring properly emphasised by the appropriate background. He would always see her like that in future. His desolate house would be haunted for all the desolate time to come.

He rode round by the stable yard, gave his horse to the groom, and such was the disorder of his mind that he flinched from being seen, even by Hemming. He forgot that he had hoped the mid-day post might bring him news. He went out of the yard, round by the garden, and in through the window of his own den.

Seating himself by his writing table, he found a railway guide, but he did not even open it. His mind was too thoroughly preoccupied with its own bitterness. He rested his elbows on the desk, propping his chin upon them, in a sort of exhaustion of defeat.

When he wandered that day all unwitting into Hertford House, his two angels had wandered with him — the good and the evil. The good had taken his hand, had whispered persuasively that his sad days were over — had shown him something so fair and sweet that —— Ah, but the black spirit at his elbow had pushed forward. "After all these years in my service, do you think I am going to stand aside and see you join the opposition?"

He heard the dressing-bell ring, and realised that, if he meant to catch that train, he must call Hemming and

have his things put together at once. Yet still he could not move. The bonds of his misery seemed to hold him tied to his chair, tied to this ghastly echoing house full of phantoms. He had had no food since about noon, and his emptiness had passed beyond the stage of hunger. It made him dazed. As he sat there, it was as though life surged within him for the last time, urging him to go to Worthing and face his doom like a man; and as though the old house rejoiced over his stupor, murmuring that his place was there, among the ruins of his own brutal folly and fruitless hate.

With an effort he stood up, found matches, lit the gas. He must and would look at that railway guide. Yet, when the light shone upon his untidy table, he forgot all about Bradshaw. There, lying where he had laid them before going out, were certain cases of jewellery which had that morning come back from London. He had had everything cleaned, and some things re-set, in the phantom hope of a time when he might be allowed to give her presents.

He fixed his eyes upon the leather cases, as if they had been so many coffins. For the moment he gave up the attempt to consider his expedition. It seemed so important that he should realise just how futile his attempts to undo the past must inevitably prove.

A light step came along the passage. He almost groaned, for it might have been hers; and he dreaded lest all his life he should be pursued by those haunting footfalls. Then a touch upon the handle of the door startled him in a second from apathy. The handle was turning, the door was about to open. What should he see? In his present exalted abnormal frame of mind, he might see anything, might even cause his thought of her to take shape, so that she stood in bodily presence before him.

It seemed to him only what he had foreseen when the slowly opening oak revealed her standing there.

He knew that it was her wraith, because she was so white — so unnaturally white. She wore white, too. Her eyes were dilated, with a dread which she could not conceal. It is possible that he might have heard the beating of her heart, had his own not pulsed so loudly.

He rose slowly to his feet — slowly, to match her entrance. He neither moved nor spoke, as she shut the door carefully behind her. As she did so the thought stirred in his mind that he had never heard of a ghost who closed a door. But his mind was a long way off. The part of him now active was something utterly different.

Then she moved forward towards him as he stood in the circle of light. She came on bravely until she was within a few paces of him, and then paused, and gave a little sound between a laugh and a gasp.

"Well," said she, and valiantly held out her hand, "I have come back, you see!"

He was so startled at her voice that he gave a low cry. Moving suddenly — always with him a mark of strong agitation — he first grasped her hand in both his own, then retaining it with one, passed the other hesitatingly up her arm, till it rested upon her warm shoulder. "My God," he said, "you are real! Speak, Virginia — are you real?"

She set her teeth in the effort not to flinch, but she shook so that her trembling was perceptible to him.

"Real? Yes, of course. Did you think I was a ghost?" she asked, shrinking a little backward, so that his hand fell from her shoulder.

"I did! How could you come here? You were ill! Ferris said ——"

"But I am better, and I told you in my letter that I should come the first minute that I was able."

"What letter?"

She shuddered a little. Then it was true! Her letter had been kept back! "I telegraphed to-day," she stammered, more and more nervous. "You were out, but the motor met me at the station. When I arrived I told them not to tell you I was here. I — I thought I would tell you myself. Oh, are you angry with me?"

"Angry?" he said with breaking voice. He turned his head aside, for he could not control the working of his face.

"Why are you so surprised to see me?" she ventured, after a pause. "You knew I should come back."

"How could I know it?" he asked, almost inaudibly.

"I was on my honour," she answered, equally low. Then, gathering force as he still stood with averted face, "I gave you my word to submit to anything, if you let me go to Pansy. She doesn't need me any more, so I am here." She waited a moment, but still he did not speak. "I am well and strong now," she persisted bravely. "I can do anything that you wish. What are you going to do with me?"

"There's only one thing I can do with you," came the answer. "I can't let you go."

She stood immovably, her eyes fixed upon him. The dread lest he was not perfectly sane once more assailed her. Her mother had spoken of him as a monomaniac. Perhaps she feared him more at that moment than ever previously.

When he turned abruptly, with his characteristic jerk, she started and shrank only too visibly.

"Explain," he said. "Sit down in this chair — you look as white as a sheet — and explain. You tell me you

are well and strong. Your mother in a letter which I got last Saturday morning told me you were seriously ill. Ferris, whom I met to-day in town, said that the doctor would not let you get up. There is some discrepancy here."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I know," she said. "May I tell you about it?"

"Certainly."

He had seated her in the old wooden writing-chair from which he had risen. He fetched another for himself, and placed it near. The lamp fell upon her burnished hair and upon his strained face as he raised it to her. It struck her that he was very different from her memory of him. His eyes had surely grown larger, his face thinner. His close-cut hair changed his appearance. He wore other, nicer clothes than those in which she was accustomed to see him; but chiefly he looked younger, less assured. There was something almost wistful in his expression.

She gave a swift, appraising glance, and lowered her eyes to the table. In her nervousness she would have liked to take up a paper knife and play with it. Some deep instinct told her to be simple and perfectly straightforward. She let her hands lie in her lap.

"Mamma," she began, "did not want me to come back. I — I suppose she told you of the vexatious motor accident, which obliged Mr. Rosenberg and me to stop the night in a horrid little wayside inn?"

"She said something of it — yes."

"Of course I was most anxious not to have to be away all night, because I was to leave Worthing next day to come back here, and so, when the car did not return, I was urgent in begging that we might try to reach home some other way. So we drove in a little open cart, through pouring rain, to try and catch a train — the last train —

and just missed it. I got very wet, and I could not dry my things properly, the place was so dirty and comfortless; and I got a little feverish chill. It was not much, but it made me delirious for some hours. I think the fever was partly because I was vexed and anxious. You see, I had written to you to say I was coming, and it was annoying to be stopped like that. Anyway, when I was sensible again mamma said I — I had been saying things . . . you understand . . . things about you . . . when I didn't know what I was talking about."

"I see." His tone was dry.

"I had been very careful," she urged humbly, "not to say anything about what had passed between us. I hope you will forgive me for letting things out, unintentionally?"

"Let me hear all that happened before we talk about that."

She looked frightened, but after a short pause continued indomitably.

"Mamma seemed horrified. She begged me not to come back to you. In order to delay my coming, she told the doctor to keep me in bed, though I was practically well. I did not know what to do. I pretended to give in. Then she went to town — this morning — for a day's shopping or something, and Grover and I ran away without telling anybody. I hope you think I did right. You see, I knew I ought to come; I would not have deceived mamma, but my first duty is to you, and Grover told me that she had done something she really had no right to do. She had intercepted a letter from me to you. Ah, I know, it was partly my fault. I don't know what I may have said when I was wandering. She thought she was acting for the best, no doubt. But I felt unsafe somehow."

"I suppose you mean," said Gaunt slowly, "that your

mother thought you had better not come back to me at all?"

"I think so — yes. She said the law would give me relief ——"

"She was very probably right. And yet — you came? . . . It did not strike you that that was a foolish thing to do? You did not reflect that possession is nine points of the law?"

He was looking fully at her, voice and eyes alike charged with meaning which could not be mistaken. She did not flinch. Her brown eyes told him that she had reflected, that in returning she was fully conscious of the finality of her action.

"I had not to consider that," was her instant reply. "I had to do what I knew to be right. I had to keep my word."

She spoke most evidently without any desire to create an effect. The listening man restrained himself with difficulty, but held on for a moment, to elucidate one more point.

"You came back, perhaps, in order to lay the case before me? To see if I would set you free?"

"Certainly not," was the steady answer. "You and I made an agreement. You have kept your half — you have done all you promised; but I"— the colour rushed over her face —"I have not done any of my share."

Not at all theatrically, but as naturally as an old Italian peasant will kiss the Madonna's feet, he slipped from his chair to his knees. So quietly that it did not startle Virginia at all, he took up one of the hands that lay in her lap and raised it to his lips. The action, so unlike him, the silence in which he performed it, amazed her so that she neither moved nor spoke. He replaced her hand, laying it tenderly down, and seemed as though he would speak, from his lowly position at her feet. Then, with

his own brusque suddenness, he rose, and stood beside her, almost over her.

"God has used me better than I deserved," he muttered gruffly. "He has let me prove — prove to the hilt — that there is such a thing as a perfectly noble woman. Virginia, there shall be a way out for you. If you think my word of any value, I give it solemnly. I will make things right somehow. I may not be able to do it at once; I must think the matter over carefully. In the meantime, I want you to understand my position." He paused a moment, and then spoke more fluently, as if the thing he expressed had long been in his mind and so came easily from his lips. "When I first met you I had been, to all intents and purposes, a madman for twenty years. I had not been twenty-four hours your husband before I came to myself. It was as though — only I can't express it — as though your innocence were a looking-glass, in which I saw the kind of thing I am. Ever since, I have been your humble servant. I — I tried to let you see this, but of course it was hopeless. You were ill, and they told me to keep out of your way. Then, when you left me . . . your heart was full of your little sister, occupied with your own grief. I couldn't force on you the consideration of mine."

He paused, and she knew it was to summon command of his voice.

"And the idea came to me that I would wait — that I would find out, for a certainty, that you really were as fine as I had grown to think you. I wanted to prove that you were heroic enough to come back to — to the sort of thing which, as you believed, awaited you here. So I wouldn't write to you as I longed to . . . I just kept silence . . . and you came. You are here . . . I am such a fool at saying what I mean, but I must make you understand that, for so long as it may be necessary for

you to remain, you are sacred. I — I will ask you to let me eat with you, and be with you sometimes, because of — er — the household. But once for all, I want you to feel quite sure that you have nothing to fear from me."

Thus, for the second time in her knowledge of him, the man broke through his taciturnity. She could not know that this outburst was far more characteristic of the real Osbert Gaunt than the sullen, frozen surface hitherto presented.

She had no words in which to answer it. The world had turned upside down, she could not reason, could not think out what this might ultimately mean for her. She could not grasp the fact of her husband's complete change of front. Seated in the old chair, worn shiny with many years of usage, she laid her hands upon its arms and lifted her eyes to his, first in wonder, then in a gladness which shone out in a smile that transfigured her pale face. He was quite near — almost stooping over her, and he held his breath with the intensity of the thrill that ran through him.

"O-o-oh!" she cooed tremulously. "Oh, Osbert!"

The sound of his name so moved him that he almost lost control. It sounded like a caress, it was as if she had kissed him. He told himself that he would count up the times she said it, from now until his final exit — treasure them in his mind and call them kisses.

At this moment the gong for dinner boomed in the hall. It brought both of them back with a start to the present moment. Virgie put her hands to her eyes as if she had been dreaming. The man was first of all uncomfortably conscious of riding breeches and gaiters.

"Good heavens, dinner, and I haven't dressed! I can't sit down with you like this!"

"Oh, yes, please do," she said, rising from her seat with a new gaiety, as though a weight had rolled away.

"Please don't keep me waiting while you dress, I am so hungry, and I want to show you my fine new appetite! Besides, Grover is sure to drive me upstairs at an unearthly hour, she has been clucking after me all day like an old mother hen, because, you see, I actually got out of bed to travel! So don't waste any more time, but just come in as you are."

"I'll wash my hands — shan't be five minutes," he stammered out, the sudden, everyday intimacy breaking upon him like a fiery, hitherto untasted source of bliss. "Wait for me, won't you?"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DIFFICULT PATH

"I will but say what mere friends say.
Or only a thought stronger;
I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
Or so very little longer."— R. BROWNING.

WHEN Gaunt entered the dining-room, his wife was standing before the fire, its red glow making her white dress and white arms rosy. Hemming was busily employed in fixing a screen at the back of her chair.

"I asked Hemming to move my place," said she. "I hope you don't mind. I felt so far away, there at the end of the table. If I sit here we can talk much better."

"A good idea." Gaunt hoped his voice sounded natural as he spoke. He hardly knew what he said, such was the turmoil within him that he wondered whether his own appetite would fail as hers had done when last they ate together. Yet he was, as a matter of fact, ravenously hungry; and the taking of food steadied him down and made him feel more normal. He found himself obliged, however, to leave the burden of conversation to her. She talked on bravely, about Dr. Danby and his kindness to Pansy, until, the servants having left the room to fetch the next course, she turned half-frightened, half-challenging eyes to her husband.

"I'm afraid I'm 'prattling,' as you call it," she said deprecatingly. "Shall I leave off? I will, if I am teasing you."

"Forgive me. I'm not really unresponsive — only a

bit bewildered," he answered. "You know that nothing you could conceivably say could fail to interest me. Don't remind me of my unconverted days."

She could not answer, for Hemming returned at the moment. She smiled and coloured.

Left to themselves before the peaches and grapes, when dinner was over, they fell silent. The memory of the former occasion tied the girl's tongue.

The man was facing his problem. Virginia sat there with him, in his house — his wife. She had come back prepared to accept this fate. Had he the strength to resist, the greatness not to take advantage of, her integrity and courage?

The first thing he must do was to ascertain, if possible, her feeling for Gerald Rosenberg, and also whether the young man was really earnest in his love for her.

If he could be satisfied on both these heads, he told himself that he must make atonement in the one possible way. His white lily should never go through the mire of a divorce court, nor must lack of money stand between her and the man of her choice.

Such thoughts as these are inimical to conversation. He sat for some long minutes peeling a peach, and then sensing the delight of watching her while she ate it.

Grover entered quietly. "I just looked in to say I hope you will come upstairs punctually at nine, ma'am," said she, with a keen glance at the two.

"Yes, Grover; I will be good to-night — though I warn you your tyranny is nearly over," said Virgie, her eyes full of mischief. How gay she was when the gaiety was not dashed out of her! As Grover retired, she rose from her chair and looked at him pleadingly. "I wonder if you would do something for me to-night — something I specially want you to do?" said she in tones of coaxing.

"But of course!" He was on his feet in a moment.

"I want you to play to me — on the piano. You played that — first — night. Do you remember?"

"You liked it?"

She nodded.

"I used to hear you afterwards — when I was upstairs. Grover used to open the door for me to listen," she confessed.

"Really?" He showed his intense pleasure in this tribute. "Come," he said, "I have got a new piano to show you."

They went together down the passage to the door of her own sitting-room, now, needless to say, unlocked. They passed in; and Gaunt thought himself overpaid for anything he had ever suffered when he heard her first "O-o-oh!" of surprise and pleasure.

The ivory room lay in warm light. The fire danced on the hearth; and upon the pale blue, rose-garlanded hearth-rug lay Cosmo and Damian, with bows to match their surroundings.

The graceful, wine-dark furniture gleamed in the mellow lamp-light. Every piece in the room was perfection in its way. There was a Chesterfield in just the right place, at right angles to the fire. Beside it, a small revolving table book-case alone struck a note of frank modernity, and needed but the books and work to complete it.

"You like it?" he asked, trying to mask his eager wistfulness.

"I should think so! You never told me a word! You had this all done! Oh, how curious!" she murmured in wonder, recalling with a shock the dream which she had dreamt — how she had sought in vain for the old furniture in the attic, and going into this room where she now stood had seen it full of formless whiteness.

"Why do you call it curious?" he asked.

"Because I dreamt about it," she answered, laughing shamefacedly. "I dreamt that I had come back, and was looking for you — that I was up in the attics and could not find this furniture — and that when I came downstairs, this room was empty and all white and ghostly ——"

"Did you succeed in finding me — in your dream?"

"Yes." She laughed again. "But it was all stupid — you know dreams are. Oh, what a darling piano! And that fine old book-cupboard with glass doors! A secretaire — isn't that the proper name for it?"

"Do you like it? I am glad. I have hung no pictures. Daren't trust my own taste there. Also, I felt that I must leave you to choose your own books — or perhaps you would put china in that cupboard? I find there is a quantity of old blue stored away up above in the garret. It might amuse you to select and arrange it."

"Oh, it will!" said Virgie in delight. "How pretty it all looks! I had no idea it could be so changed by just being treated right. Don't you want to do all the rest of the house?"

"I want *you* to do it," he answered.

"But I couldn't have thought of anything half as perfect as this!" was her admiring response.

He smiled, but let the compliment pass.

"I want you to put your feet up now," he said, "for I know you must be tired to death. Let me show you how the end of your couch lets down. There! Are the pillows right?"

She ensconced herself in luxury. "This is just like a dream," she said; "and if you will play to me, it will be still more so. I'll graciously allow you to drink your coffee first," she added, as Hemming came in.

He stood before the hearth as he drank his coffee, looking down upon her and wondering how long he was going

to bear things. He must find a way out before his resolution quite failed.

With that disconcerting suddenness of his, he put down his cup and made a dash for the piano. As he sat at the keyboard he could see the top of her shining head just above the delicate-hued cushions which supported it. He saw Cosmo jump upon her lap, and he watched the waving to and fro of her hand as she gently stroked the cat. When he stopped playing she begged him to go on. Then after a while the little hand ceased to move. The head was very still. At last he paused, let his hands fall, waited. No sound. He rose and limped across the soft carpet with noiseless feet. She was fast asleep.

Just for a moment he allowed himself to stand there looking upon her. His strong, somewhat harsh features wore a look which transfigured them. Then he turned away with his mouth hard set. He had no right there, he bitterly reminded himself.

The little buhl clock chimed nine in silver tones. He went softly to the door to prevent Grover from coming in and awakening her abruptly. As he opened it, Hemming was approaching with a telegram upon a tray. He took it, and as he read his eyes lit with a gleam of satisfaction.

Is Virginia with you? She left Worthing this morning.

Making a sign to Hemming not to disturb Mrs. Gaunt, he went over to the writing-table and wrote:

Virginia came home to-day, as previously arranged. Seems very well.

As Hemming took the message and departed, Grover came along the passage. Gaunt admitted her, with a shy smile.

"I have played her to sleep," he said. "It seems a shame to disturb her."

Grover went and stooped over Virginia, then raised her eyes to the husband's face.

"Spite of that tiresome chill, she looks a deal stronger, doesn't she, sir?" she asked in hushed accents.

He nodded, beckoning her to come to him at some distance, that their lowered tones might not disturb the sleeper. "Grover, is it true, for a fact, that Mrs. Mynors kept back a letter from Mrs. Gaunt to me?"

"I can't swear to it, sir, not what they'd take in a court of justice, I suppose; but I'll tell you what happened about it." She related the circumstances, and then asked whether he had, in fact, received the letter. When she heard that he had not, she looked triumphant, but she looked troubled too.

"I can't seem to make out the rights of it, sir, but there was something afoot. For some reason which I can't understand, they didn't want her to come back here. I can't make head nor tail of it myself."

"Was this Mr. Rosenberg's plot, do you think?"

"Well, sir, that is what is so puzzling. Mrs. Mynors is, I suppose, a respectable lady. She isn't what you call fast; and her daughter is a married woman. What could she mean?"

"Tell me frankly, Grover. Do you think they had an idea of making mischief, serious enough to cause a breach between Mrs. Gaunt and me?"

"Oh, for pity's sake, they couldn't be so wicked as that! And you but just married! But since you have put it so plain, I will just own to you that I feel sure in my own mind about one thing, which is that Baines, that's Mr. Rosenberg's chauffeur, was given orders not to bring back the car to fetch them that night. He never

said so to me, not in so many words, but it was the look in his eye, sir, if you understand me."

"Do you think that her mother supposed that Mrs. Gaunt was not happy with me?"

"Why, sir, if you'll pardon the remark, that sounds like nonsense, for you have had no chance to be together so far. I can tell you I was thankful when I was once safe in the train with her this morning. I felt, even if she has to go back to bed the minute she gets home, home is the proper place for her, any way of it. And though she was leaving her little sister and all, she seemed to cheer up when we were off; and I know she felt a relief when we had got through London and were fair on our way. We had to steal out of the house as careful as anything, for Miss Pansy was not started for the parade front, it being so early. Fortunately, Mr. Tony was off for the day with his friend."

"Tony? Was the boy there?"

"Oh, yes, sir, for the whole time, and the last week we were in London as well."

Gaunt was surprised. No room or board for Tony had been charged in any of the minutely kept accounts which he had received. He made no comment, however, and the maid crossed the room and gazed once more upon the sleeping girl.

"Don't you think she looks bonny, sir?" she asked timidly; and was reassured when Gaunt's eyes met her own in friendly approval.

"She's more lovely than ever, Grover," he replied, to her immense gratification.

"You might carry her upstairs, sir," she suggested; "you can do it easy, can't you?"

His face changed. "No," he said decidedly, "it would startle her. You had better rouse her, please, if you want her to go with you now."

He walked away to the window, and stood in the empty space for which he had designed the statue of Love. Grover sent a keen, vexed glance after him. "Silly thing," was her disrespectful inward comment. "Why is he so plaguey shy of his own wife?"

"She'll have to get used to you, sir," she ventured after a pause, her heart in her mouth.

"It must be by degree," he answered, speaking with his back towards her.

With a shrug of her shoulders, having ventured all and more than all she dare, she bent over Virginia and aroused her. The grey cat bounded to the floor, hunching his back and stretching his legs in the heat of the glowing logs.

"Oh!" cried Virgie, springing to her feet, "I went to sleep while Mr. Gaunt was playing!"

"The greatest tribute you could pay me, since I played a lullaby," remarked her husband, strolling up.

. . . . . .

Next morning, though it was still cold, autumnal weather, the sun was shining. Gaunt could hardly believe his eyes when Virgie ran into the dining-room at the summons of the breakfast gong, looking as fresh and gay as the morning. The contrast between what was in his heart, and his cool, undemonstrative greeting, struck him as so grotesque that he almost laughed.

When they were seated, and she had poured out his coffee, they found it very difficult to know what to say. Virginia felt herself held back by what he had said the previous day. He had spoken as though he thought her stay at Omberleigh would be only temporary. She was eager to settle down, to know what she might do and plan, to begin some kind of a life together. In face of his attitude, she felt unable to make any advance, to offer any request or suggestion.

At last it occurred to her to ask what he had to do that day. He began to tell her that he was due in a certain part of the estate to —— Then he pulled himself up, and said, with a covert eagerness:

"Unless you want me?"

She rested her elbows on the table and looked shyly at him. "Of course I should like to have your society for a while," she answered. "I want to go round the place again. I was so stupid that first day — I felt so ill I hardly knew what I was doing. But now I can walk finely! If you have time ——"

"But of course I have. Caunter is all right without me. I am at your service. Do you remember one day when you were on the terrace, and Mrs. Ferris was here, you said, or she said, that you would like to remodel the garden? Well, you know this is the time of year to do that. If you set to work now it will be all ready for next spring."

She looked at him earnestly. "Please forgive me for asking," she said hesitatingly, "but yesterday I thought you said — you spoke as if you did not mean to keep me here. Did you mean that, or was it my fancy?"

He cleared his throat. "Oh, that was your fancy. Certainly it was. I was only thinking that — of course everything is uncertain — human life, for instance. I'm a good deal older than you. If anything should — should happen to me, for example — this place would be yours. I have bequeathed it to you. So it is worth your while to make it what you like."

"If anything happened to you?" Obviously she was surprised, and also distressed. "Osbert, what is likely to happen to you?"

"Oh, nothing, of course," he replied hastily. "Only sometimes the unexpected may arrive, may it not?"

"Don't talk like that," she cried impetuously. "It

would be too dreadful, if anything stopped us just at the beginning — just as we are making a start. Oh, do you remember ——" She broke off short.

"I remember every single smallest thing you ever did or said," he threw out suddenly.

"Then you remember when you and I had lunch together at the Savoy. I bored you horribly by trying to make conversation, when you didn't want to talk; and you told me that you knew all about me, as if you had known me all my life. I didn't think it was true," she laughed, playing with a fork and not daring to look at him. "Do you think it was?"

"It was as false, as detestable, as mistaken, and as insulting as all the other things I said that day," was his energetic answer.

She looked up then, and smiled at him. She was beginning to adjust her ideas.

"Then you are not thinking of sending me away?" she begged to know.

"Put that completely out of your head."

"If that is so, it will be the greatest fun to set to work upon the garden." She paused, recollected herself. "Will that interest you too? I beg your pardon for asking, but I do know so ridiculously little about you; and, you see, your garden doesn't *look* as if you liked gardens, if you will forgive me for saying it."

"I've been so lonely," he answered meekly. "There was nobody who cared whether the garden was nice or not. If you care, why I shall take the most tremendous interest in it."

She was evidently quite satisfied. "Let me see," she reflected. "How soon can we begin? I must go and say how-do-you-do to Mrs. Wells, and she will tell me what I am to order for dinner; and then I must send a line to Joey, and ask her to come over to tea to-morrow."

"You have a car of your own now," he broke in. "Don't be beholden to her any more than you wish."

"She was very kind," said Virgie, "and I know she would like to come if you don't mind. I'm sorry for her too."

"Why are you sorry for her?"

She looked up at him, with a half smile, and an appeal for response. "Her husband is such a — such a *dreadful* person, isn't he?"

Gaunt, for the first time in their mutual acquaintance, gave the sympathy, the understanding for which she begged. He smiled, in the same way that she smiled, as if they were thoroughly in accord upon the point of Mr. Ferris. "Poor old Joey!" he replied. "Your society must be a godsend to her. They were kind to me while you were away. I went there several times. Joey let me read your letters to her."

This last was very tentatively said, with an apprehensive glance.

Virgie laughed, however. "Such silly letters," she remarked. Then, laying aside her table-napkin and rising: "Then in an hour's time, shall we go out in the garden?"

He eagerly assented. "I'll go down to the lodge and get Emerson to come along," he told her. "Then we can plan something."

They spent the entire morning in the garden, and at lunch time there was certainly no lack of conversation. In the absorbing topic of rock-gardening, the idea of redecorating the house fell temporarily into the background.

They motored into Buxton that afternoon, and spent some time viewing the plants in a celebrated nursery garden. Gaunt had learned to drive the car during her absence, and was himself at the wheel, which fact lessened for him the hardship of the situation. He was

occupied with his driving, and not drawn irresistibly by the magnet of her charm. That evening, however, after dinner, when they were together in her beautiful warm white room, the tug of war began. He had to smother down the impulse to fight for his life, to make some kind of blundering bid for the love which he knew in his heart had been given to Rosenberg before he ever saw her.

Virginia could not but suppose that his coldness, his complete aloofness, his apparent declining of all beginnings of intimacy, arose from sheer shyness. She believed that some things are better and more easily expressed without words. Thus, that evening, when he was at the piano, playing out his heartache in soft, sad chords in passionate, rapid movements, she came and stood behind him — close behind him.

This was hard, but he bore it. Manfully he went on playing for a while; but the influence of her presence standing there, the emanation of her personality, checked his fingers. He stumbled, missed a note, dropped his hands, sat silent.

"It is cold, so far from the fire," said her coaxing voice. "I've been making you play till your fingers are frozen;" with which she took them in her velvet, soft clasp.

This was too much. He drew his hand from her clinging touch with a sensation as though he tore it from a trap, lacerating it in the attempt. He sprang from his seat. "Jove! I have just thought of something I must tell Hemming," he muttered hurriedly; and, pushing past her, left the room by way of the door into his own den.

Virginia stood amazed, confused, and somewhat uncomfortable.

This, her first advance, must certainly be her only one. She went and sat on the hearth-rug, gazing into the fire,

and puzzling. Suddenly a clear light shone upon the darkness of her musing. But, of course! . . .

Gaunt had not married her for love, but in pursuance of some half-crazed scheme of vengeance. He had thought it his duty to reform a heartless, selfish coquette. Now that he had found her to be very unlike his preconceived idea of her, what did he, what could he, want with her? . . .

Why had she not sooner perceived this obvious truth? Colour flooded her, she blushed hotly in the solitude. His plans had proved abortive, and he found himself saddled with a young woman with whose company he would, no doubt, gladly dispense. He was apparently ready to continue their present semi-detached existence, so long as she made no attempt to force the barriers of his confidence or intimacy. She remembered, on reflection, that he had made no appeal to her, that he had confessed nothing. He had not even begged for forgiveness. He had merely owned himself mistaken in his estimate of her. Since the outburst which had, as it seemed, been shaken out of him at the unexpected sight of her, he had stood on guard all the time. She had really been very slow and stupid, or she would have seen, long ago, how embarrassing her presence must be, unless she grasped the terms of their mutual relation.

Her lips curved into an involuntary smile as she recalled her well-meant attempt at a kindness he did not want. She bit her lip as she gazed into the fire. "We-e-ell!" she said aloud, with a little grimace, "I've been slow at picking up my cue, but I think I've got it now."

Almost as she spoke Gaunt re-entered, and Grim the collie slunk in at his heels.

"I'm most awfully sorry for bolting like that, but it

was important," he said, in tones of would-be friendly frankness. With that he turned to shut the dog out.

"Oh, let her come in, poor old girl! What has she done to be shut out?" cried Virgie, sitting on her heels upon the floor.

"I — I don't think your cats like her," he replied, hesitating.

"Well, I never! They will have to like her. If they are to live in the same house, they must be friends," was the quick retort. "Grim, Grim, poor old girl, come here then!"

Grim, more perceptive than her master, was quick to perceive the invitation in the sweet voice, and came bounding into the circle of firelight. Damian sat up and spat, his back an arch, his tail a column. Virgie flung her arms round Grim's handsome neck and hugged her.

"Don't you take a bit of notice of that cheeky kitten, my dear. If he doesn't like you, he can lump you. This was your house, long before he was born or thought of," she said, petting the collie till her tail thumped the ground with ecstasy; her tongue hung out and she slobbered with uter content.

"Osbert," said Virgie calmly, "there's a sheepskin mat out in the hall that would just do for her beside the fire here in the corner. If that is her place, the cats will very soon recognise it. Will you go and fetch it in for me, please?"

"But" — he paused —"this is your room, isn't it? and Grim's a big dog. Her place is in my den."

"Oh, she'll very soon find out where the warmest corner is, won't you, girl?" laughed Virgie. "Even if *you* won't come into my room, I'll warrant she will! Unless" — with a daring glance —"you mean us to have separate establishments, even to the dogs and cats?"

He began to speak, halted, then said quietly enough: "I want you to have things as you like. I think you know that, really."

"Then this poor old thing shall come in just whenever she wants to," said Virgie, holding the golden muzzle in her hand, and kissing the white star upon the dog's forehead.

Gaunt, watching, made a note of the exact spot.

CHAPTER XXVII

LUNCH AT PERLEY HATCH

"Shall I not one day remember thy bower,
One day when all days are one day to me?
Thinking, 'I stirred not, and yet had the power!'
Yearning, 'Ah, God, if again it might be!'"— D. G. Rossetti.

"You're not the sort to bet on, Percy," remarked Joey Ferris. "What have you been filling me up with? You came home here, saying you could put me wise about the Gaunt marriage, and that the whole thing was going phut, and she wasn't coming back to him!"

"Well!"

"Well, you're off the rails this time, old man. She came home on Wednesday, and this morning I had a note from her to say she would call for me in the car this afternoon, and take me over to Omberleigh to tea."

"Jove though!" Ferris stood stock still in his astonishment. "You're kidding, Joey?"

"Wish I may die," was the chaste rejoinder.

Ferris turned things rapidly over in his mind. "Did you go?" he asked at length.

"Go? I should think so. She is as well as ever she was in her life — laughing and talking, as different from the timid little crushed thing she was, as you are different from Gaunt! While she was away, he has had her own sitting-room all done up for her, and my word! he has done it in style. You never saw anything so classy; it's like the little boudoir at the Chase; and she says he never bought a thing, except the carpet and curtains. The furniture and china was all in the house, put away, and

they've got enough left to furnish the dining-room as well. My, it'll be a nice place by the time she's done with it."

"Joey, I give you my word, that on Saturday she was in bed, delirious, and her mother sat up all night with her."

"That might be. Look how Bill's temperature runs up if he gets a bit of a chill! She was all right by Wednesday, and now she's as fit as a fiddle. Seems so keen about things too. Got a great idea of going over the mine. I thought we might have 'em both to lunch next week, and take them round after."

"Good idea. But have you forgotten that Rosenberg will be staying here?"

"Not me. That doesn't make a bit of difference. She was talking about him as easily as you might talk about me. Tell you what, Percy, you've got the wrong sow by the ear this time."

"If there's been a mistake, it was Rosenberg's, not mine," said Ferris. "You may bet on that. Seems to me he's about put himself in the cart."

"Why, how? What do you mean?"

Ferris laughed. "He insisted on laying me fifty sovereigns to one that she never went back to Gaunt. I told him he didn't know O.G. as well as I do."

"Pooh! He didn't know Virgie, much more likely. She's still water, is that little lady."

"Huh? You don't mean she's not straight?"

"Not much. She's the straightest goer I ever came across. But she doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve."

"I don't know where she keeps it then," said Percy, with a grin. "You don't suppose old Gaunt's got it, do you?"

"Couldn't tell you that, but one thing I *can* say for certain. It doesn't belong to young Rosenberg."

"Are you sure, Joey?"

"Yes," said she simply.

"I can go pretty near the truth of it, I expect," she added presently. "Rosenberg tried to make mischief, and it hasn't come off."

"He told me Gaunt was cruel to her — actually tortured her," said Percy, in a lowered voice. "Said she let it out in her delirium."

"Go and tell that to the next one," scorned his wife. "If it's true, then being tortured agrees with her."

"You can't deny she was very ill when she first came here."

"Yes, but that was none of Gaunt's doing. That was because she had been starving herself and doing all the housework for the best part of two years."

"Well, I'll have to try and explain matters to Rosenberg when he comes next week," said Percy, quite meek and crestfallen.

. . . . . .

At Omberleigh meanwhile, since the moment when Virgie grasped the position, things had been going on fairly well. By degrees, a footing of friendly acquaintanceship had been established, which was sustained without difficulty on the woman's part. The man, however, was less satisfied. He went about each day with the knowledge that, if he was not quick about accomplishing some sort of suicide which should be obviously accidental, his own control might fail him at any moment, and the present state of tantalising half-and-half would become impossible to maintain.

Yet, for a strong, energetic, experienced man to kill himself in such a manner that nobody should suspect him of having done so was harder than he had foreseen. He turned over plan after plan in his mind, only to reject them all. He began to despair of ever accomplishing

his purpose convincingly, as long as he stayed in England. The idea of taking Virginia to Switzerland suggested itself. There it would be comparatively simple. He would only have to leave her in a comfortable hotel, taking care that she had plenty of money, and go rambling on a mountain side alone, hurling himself down any precipice which looked sufficiently steep to make a thorough job of it.

Against this was the fact that it was growing late in the season for Switzerland, and most of the mountain hotels would be closed. The mere circumstance of his selecting Switzerland for a late autumn holiday might look suspicious in the light of after events.

To do the thing intentionally, which was by far the easiest plan, was, from his point of view, out of the question, because of the implied slur upon his widow. If a newly married man commits suicide, he may leave a hundred explanations, assuring his wife of his happiness with her, but they will impose upon nobody. He was determined not to expose his beloved to the evil tongues of rumour; yet he felt he must shortly take some definite action or go mad.

In this frame of mind he heard with interest that Gerald was coming to stay at Perley Hatch. So far, he had had no chance to gather anything of Virginia's feeling for him. Two or three times he had tried to ask, but voice and courage failed him. In his male density, he imagined that he would not be able to see the two together without coming to a conclusion. He urged the acceptance of Joey's invitation. Virginia's health, since her return, gave no cause for anxiety, and she was eager to explore the cave.

It was in a mood of great depression that he set out with her upon the day fixed. He was uncertain of everything — of her feeling, of his own intentions, of Gerald's

worth. The existing state of things, difficult though it might be, was perilously sweet. There were hours when he told himself that he was an utter fool, and that his present attitude was a quixotry which bordered upon madness; yet there seemed no way to end it. Every day of the footing upon which he and his wife now stood made it more irrelevant, as it were, for him to turn from lukewarm companion into ardent lover . . . and when he tried to face what would be his feeling if she rejected him, as she might — or worse still if, as was more likely, she submitted to his love without returning it — he felt that he simply did not dare risk it.

Virginia was quick to note his depression. The variability of his spirits nowadays was more noticeable than he supposed. Sometimes her light-hearted nonsense would beguile him into something like hilarity. These moments were usually, as she was well aware, followed by a corresponding withdrawal. She built all her hopes upon them, however, for it seemed to her that in the period of reaction he never slipped back quite so far into the realms of distance. It was an approach, though a very gradual one. Like a rising tide, each wave fell back; but, all the same, the flood mounted.

She chatted gaily as she sat beside him in the car, talking of the matters which engrossed her — the garden and the house; also of an invitation to the Chase to dine, which had lately been accepted. He could not perceive that she manifested the least consciousness of being on the way to meet her lover.

When they walked together into Joey's drawing-room, he was not so certain. Rosenberg, in spite of self-command, betrayed a very obvious embarrassment. If her feeling were doubtful, his was not. Her mere presence in the room seemed to set him a-quiver.

Gaunt shook hands with him more easily, less grudg-

ingly than on the former occasion of their meeting. This surprised Gerald somewhat. He had gone from that meeting straight to the address given him by Joey, had seen Virginia, established an intimate footing of friendship, taken her about in his car, and done other things which a newly made husband would be most apt to resent. Yet Gaunt's greeting was almost kindly. This disturbed Gerald. There must be one of two reasons for it. Either he was so sure of his wife that he could afford to ignore other men, or he knew more than he pretended to, and was on the watch, eager to take his adversary off guard.

These thoughts produced considerable constraint in the young man's manner to Virgie, whose gentle sweetness was much the same as usual.

"You made a surprisingly quick convalescence," he remarked, thinking how delicious she was in her tailor suit of silver corduroy.

"Yes," she said. "I was sure you would be pleased to know that I was not nearly so ill as mamma thought me. She was alarmed because I was feverish, but it soon went off. I am quite splendidly well now. This air suits me — doesn't it, Osbert?"

"It really seems to," he replied, ready to worship her for calling him so naturally into the conversation. "Motoring, too, agrees with you. I feel very grateful to you, Rosenberg, for giving her some runs down in Sussex, though I wish you could have avoided the drenching."

The composed voice and words made Percy feel quite hot, and for a moment they disconcerted Gerald, but he took up his cue almost at once.

"I have been afraid to look you in the face, Gaunt," he replied gratefully, "since making such an utter ass of myself. I'm glad to take this chance of apologising;

but I don't feel quite so repentant as I did, now that I see Mrs. Gaunt look so well and blooming."

Joey chimed in, vowing that the Derbyshire air was doing wonders for Virgie.

"If we could get some fine weather, Osbert ought to run you round the Peak," said Virgie to Gerald.

Gerald was puzzled. If this were acting it was jolly good. Surely this girl could not be afraid of her husband. He looked from one to the other, completely mystified.

Lunch was quite a hilarious meal. Tom and Bill were both present, and Virgie sat between them by special request. She confided various episodes from the career of Little Runt to their willing ears, and the way in which she understood them, and entered into conversation without the least effort, or any departure from her usual naturalness of manner, filled Gaunt with admiration. They behaved so well as to surprise both their parents, seeming quite hypnotised by the spell of the thrilling voice and the dainty nonsense talk with which she plied them.

After lunch, while the men stood about smoking a cigarette before starting, baby was brought down, and Joey and Virgie, kneeling on the drawing-room carpet, tried to inveigle her into making a tottering step alone. It was pathetically amusing to watch her little plump body, balanced upon its unsteady supports, her dimpled arms outspread, her baby lips parted in glee, showing the two rows of tiny pearls between. To and fro, to and fro, she wavered, with protecting arms on either hand, not touching, but guarding. Then at last, with a shriek of ecstasy at her own boldness, she ran forward — one step — two — and fell, a triumphant, huddled sweetness, right upon Virgie's breast.

The girl knelt up, clasping the rosy thing in her hug-

ging arms, kissing her cheek and praising her courage. "Oh, babs, when you are a big, grown up girl," said she, "some day I will remind you that you took your first step to me."

Gaunt stood near the window, rigid, fascinated, his whole being melted into a tenderness so poignant as to be half painful. How many sources of happiness, simple and everyday, were in the world! How barren and dry and selfish his own life had been! In his moment of insight, he saw that even Joey Ferris, tied to Percy, might have her moments of utter beatification, since he had made her the mother of this babe.

He took a new resolve. When they got home that evening, he would have it out with Virginia, he would give her her choice. He would persuade her to tell him frankly if all her heart was bound up in Gerald. If it was not . . .

He did not hear Ferris suggesting to him that they should be on the move. They had to call him thrice before he started from his dream.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WAY BACK

"She is coming, my life, my sweet,
Were it never so airy a tread,
My heart would hear it and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed.
My dust would hear it and beat
Had I lain for a century dead,
Would start and tremble under her feet
And blossom in purple and red!"— TENNYSON.

THE entrance to the lead mine cave had now been artificially widened to allow of free entrance. From the valley below a light wooden stair had been erected, up which the visitors passed. Some good workmen from a similar mine elsewhere were now busy on the premises, making the final tests before the experts would pronounce that there was really money in the scheme.

The party came presently upon a spot where a big underground stream gushed from a tunnel, crossed a space about twenty feet wide, and disappeared in another tunnel on the opposite side of the cavern. It emerged three miles away, far down Branterdale. Nobody knew whence it came.

Since first the caves were discovered, great progress had been made; and only the previous day the men had chipped open a crack in the rock wall, discovering within another big space with a very dangerous floor.

"We've all got to be careful in here," remarked Percy, as he marshalled his party. "Perhaps, Joey, you and

Mrs. Gaunt would be happier outside, for it's a case of crawling in."

Virgie and Joey, however, were not going to be left behind. They neither of them had any objection to crawling. With the help of their escort, they both got through quite easily, and found themselves in a curious place. Under their feet were spikes of rock, with deep inequalities between. The men had laid down planks, and warned the visitors to be careful not to step off them. On the further side of this cavern was a very deep cleft which had not yet been explored, as the men had found the air down there too foul for them to venture to descend.

"Like an old well — they don't know how deep," said Percy, indicating a black hole, or chasm, on the further side of the irregular-shaped space in which they stood. "They got a big bundle of hay, set it alight, and pitched it in, burning fiercely. The air down there put it out in no time."

"Not much chance for anybody who went over," remarked Gaunt, moving nearer.

"Not much. Don't stand too close," replied Percy. "You see, the men put in a stake, and rigged up a rope, meaning to go down and explore; but they will have to wait till something has been done before they can make use of it."

"What will they do?" asked Virgie, with interest.

"Pump air down, I think, and force the bad gas upwards," replied Percy, who was in his element, showing and explaining.

Gaunt stood on the plank near the hole, gazing at it as if it fascinated him. His hands were in his pockets. Virgie had made a little movement when he first approached it, putting out her hand as if to grasp his arm. She checked herself, for since his rebuff she had never

touched him. But as he still stood there, seeming lost in his own thoughts, some kind of dread fell upon her. "Osbert," she said.

He turned sharply at the sound of her voice, and moved towards her.

"I believe my — my shoe-lace has come untied," said she.

It was the first thing that occurred to her to say, and she knew it was a lame excuse. He looked so intently at her that she almost thought he was aware that it was a pretext merely. Never before had she asked him to render her any such small personal service.

"Lean against the wall, and give me your foot," said he. "I'll do it up."

"Thanks. The — the air is rather close in here, isn't it?" she faltered, as she went to stand against the cave side. "Will you take me out? I feel a bit faint."

"We shall all go out in a minute or two," was his reply, as he knelt upon the plank at her feet.

He tried to steady himself as he bent over his task. He had seen something in her eyes which shook his purpose — a dawning anxiety, or fear, or . . . Was that all? Was there not more? He could not be sure.

But, if her suspicions were awake, he might have to let this chance go.

The cave echoed to Joey's loud, jolly laugh. She and Gerald were standing upon a plank which see-sawed slightly, and it amused her to make it move up and down.

"Don't play the fool there, Joe," said Ferris sharply. "This place is really not safe, you know. You and Mrs. Gaunt had better creep out again. Come along, there's nothing to see."

He took her somewhat roughly by the arm. Her weight, suddenly removed from the plank, caused Gerald, who was at the further end, to stumble. He had been

balanced upon one foot, and the uneven nature of the rocky floor gave him no place upon which to put the other foot down. It went into a hollow, quite a foot in depth. He gave a lurch, in the effort to reach the next plank, which was not quite near, and came down with all his weight upon one edge of it. It turned over, throwing him completely off his balance. He staggered, slipped, and before Joey had time to shriek, was over the edge of the poisonous gulf and had disappeared.

It all took place in a single instant. At one moment Joey and he were balancing one each end of the board, at the next Ferris had pulled her away, Gerald was crashing and stamping in the vain effort to regain his lost poise; and even as Ferris, hampered by the displaced planks, sprang to help him he was gone, and the place echoed to Joey's screams.

Gaunt, whose back had been turned to the scene, sprang up and realised instantly what had happened. In that same instant, like a flash, he saw what he must do. His chance had come to him, one in a thousand. In that same heart-beat he knew that he did not want to go — that never in all his existence had he loved life as he loved it now.

There was, however, not a moment for delay. None of the workmen were with them in the small cave; they were alone. A few minutes' hesitation might be fatal to the victim. Gaunt turned away from Virginia without looking at her, moved rapidly along a plank, took the rope which the workmen had left ready for a descent, and began to fasten it to his own body.

"Gaunt — no!" Ferris, who had stood for a moment paralysed like a man distraught, without moving or speaking, leapt at him.

"He is dead; he must be. Don't fling away your life. It's not only the bad air, it's the depth; these places go down nobody knows how deep!"

"One can but try," was the reply, as Gaunt completed the swift knotting of the rope.

"Listen to me!" he said, laying his hand upon the shaking Percy's nerveless arm, and speaking quietly and naturally with the intention of calming the other's hysteria. "Summon the men — get another rope. If I find him, I will signal by three tugs for you to pull him up. Do you understand?"

"Let — let one of the men go down," shrieked Ferris wildly.

"There isn't time. Virginia!" He raised his voice a little, and the white, still girl started.

"Crawl out at once and summon the men — as many as you can. Then send Ransom with the car for Dr. Dymock. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I am going."

That was all. So he dismissed her, so he flung love and life away from him out of the struggle. He sat upon the edge of the hole, his electric torch fixed upon his chest, the rope about his middle, and began to tie a handkerchief over his mouth.

"Don't go — don't go; he's dead by now. Oh, can't somebody come? Help! Help!" cried Ferris distractedly. "Your fault, confound you!" he shrieked to the trembling, ashy Joey.

"Silence, Ferris; I think he is calling!" . . .

Percy's cries ceased abruptly, and in the sudden pause a moan came up to them from the echoing depths.

In another instant Gaunt had disappeared.

The die was cast, and a curious peace descended upon him. The pressure of the emergency held his brain to the exclusion of all else. For the moment he had no regrets; consciousness was bounded by the difficulties of his descent. This was not nearly as awful as he had expected. There was plenty of foothold, and he went down

rapidly, coming upon Gerald's body some time before he thought it possible.

Most providentially the victim had fallen upon the bundle of hay which the workmen on the previous day had set alight and thrown in to dispel the noxious gas. The hole, at this point, was not very deep — not deeper than a well, though further along the cleft he saw a yawning gulf of unexplored horror and blackness. He stooped over Rosenberg, who was still groaning and not completely unconscious, though evidently much hurt.

"If you can hear what I say, try to do as I tell you," said he, speaking with great distinctness close to his ear. "Can you sit up?"

Gerald moved slightly, muttering something that sounded like "Let me alone!"

On that Gaunt saw that he had but one course. He must not attempt to reach the surface with him. He must transfer the rope from his own waist, and send up the injured man first.

He was still just capable of doing this, but he was growing deadly sick and faint. With the feeling that it was a race — a grim race between his failing faculties and time — he detached the cord. He succeeded, after what seemed to him like a protracted struggle, in fastening the knots round Gerald securely. Now what must he do? His brain was swimming, his breath came short, but he knew there was something else. Yes, of course! He must jerk the rope. Once — twice — thrice! He did it and waited.

Something was about to happen. He had forgotten what it was. His mind was swimming aimlessly round, like a fish in warm water, as he said to himself. He lay down. Then the thing upon which he was leaning his heavy head began to move; it was lifted; he tried to sit up, grasping in his hands the hay upon which he was

crouched. The space was very narrow. Was it wide enough to serve him for a — for a — one of those things they use to bury the dead?

It was his last thought. Immediately upon thinking it he was asleep.

. . . . . .

"Fifty pounds to the man who brings him up!" cried Virgie, kneeling upon the very brink.

Gerald had been hauled up, dragged forth from the cave, through the hole, hurried into the open air. He was alive, and they thought he would recover. But the man who had risked his life to save him lay still in the deadly abyss.

One of the workmen, however, speedily upon her appeal, roped himself up.

"Can't be very deep, 'm," he said consolingly. "If I take two ropes with me, that'll be all right. We've got a plenty hands now, and my mates can pull."

He disappeared, and Virgie crouched there on the brink, huddled and shivering, counting the terrible moments.

As she knelt in the dark, dreadful place, full of booming, terrifying noises, all life changed its values before her eyes.

This was a man who had a touch of greatness in him. He made big mistakes; he was also capable of big heroism. She knew in her heart that, if Gaunt had not been there, if the accident had happened with only the Ferrises and herself in the cave, the delay — while men were fetched to do what her husband had immediately and simply done himself — might have been, would have been, fatal. The contrast between Percy, helplessly unnerved, and Gaunt, ready to rise at once to the height of the moment, had flashed itself upon her like an instantaneous photograph. She had herself risen with Osbert. He had called her,

given her something to do — quiet, definite orders to carry out. Without a question, she went and did his bidding, though she was longing to break into cowardly pleading, to cry out to him not to throw away his life.

And she returned to find them all busy with Gerald, and nobody apparently giving a thought to the man still in the pit.

She soon changed that. Her beauty, her distress, her urgency, made stronger appeals to the men than her promise of liberal reward. And now everything, everything, hung upon the result — whether the man they brought to the surface would be still alive or not.

When the signal to draw up was given, she felt as if each passing clock-tick were a year. The dread which had sprung up in her, when she saw Gaunt hang brooding over the chasm, could never be dispersed, if he were dead. She would never know whether he truly wished to die or whether life was sweet to him.

How slowly they were hauling in the rope! How endlessly long it seemed.

Then, at last, she saw him drawn from the living tomb — limp, inert, ghastly. She rose, though her knees would hardly support her, and crawled to him as they undid the rope from about him.

The man who had gone down stood near, wiping the sweat from his eyes, and reeling slightly on his feet. He coughed, and spat, and seemed as if he would be sick. "Just hell down there, 'm," he told her, apologetically. "I'm afraid it's all over with him, God help you!"

. . . . . .

Gaunt was adrift upon a summer sea. The waves rose and fell, with a lulling cadence. He felt only one desire — the desire for sleep; but a perpetual calling kept him perversely awake. When he reached the land he would,

he knew, attain perfect repose. He made an inquiry of some unseen companion as to what was the name of the land which they would reach. The answer to this was: "They call it Virginia."

This answer delighted him. Virginia! Country of all joy and beauty. He was going to Virginia, if only this summons would cease — if only some far away, disturbing voice was not calling to him from infinite distance, begging him to make some response. He tried to plead that this voice might be silenced. But it grew more and more insistent. He could not hear what it said, but he knew that he was wanted. He might not drift out into the peace he craved. He must stop, and answer, and find out what was expected of him. He tried as hard as he could to turn a deaf ear to the calling. He almost succeeded, several times, in dropping off into real, sound sleep. But just as he was sure that now he would be let alone, something shook him, something interfered with him; and there was a pulsing in his ear, terribly loud, like the voice of a drum, so that one could not escape it.

The calling went on. "Osbert! Osbert! I want you! Do you hear me?"

Quite suddenly his mind changed, and he knew that it was of supreme importance that he should answer. The difficulty lay in the manner of so doing. How can one communicate with the beating of a drum? He wished that he could explain how unreasonable it was to expect any response from him. He heard right enough, but how could he let anybody know that he heard, with the sea lapping all about and the drum beating in his ears? . . .

Then came a curious sensation, touching a chord which vibrated throughout his entire being. He remembered quite long ago that he had been carrying a girl upstairs. Her arms were round his neck, and her heart beat, beat,

against his ear. *Was* that noise the sound of a drum after all, or was it the quick throbbing of a girl's heart?

The moment this idea occurred, it was as though a door had been unclosed, releasing him into the world of which hitherto he had been unconscious. He heard somebody saying:

"Lay him down, Mrs. Gaunt, you had much better. He will come round sooner if his head is quite flat."

Another voice replied, very, very near him: "I tell you I saw his lips move. All the time he was lying flat he never moved, and directly I lifted him up he sighed. There! Look! I tell you he *is* alive! I said he was! I knew he would come back if I called! — Osbert! Osbert! Can you hear?"

Ah, now, indeed, it would be a grand thing had one the means of letting other people, in other universes, know one's thoughts! He knew he must obey the voice that spoke, yet he was dumb, deaf, blind, because he was so far off. He was sinking away again into the tempting slumber that invited him, in spite of his ardent desire to remain here, where he could be sensible to the beating that was like the beating of a girl's heart.

"Well, lift him again then," said a doubtful voice; and once more he heard the drum, close to his ear. Now it was urgent that he should let it be understood that he knew what was going on. He must step over the edge of the plane on which he moved, and come into that upon which these others were moving; since it was clear that they would not come to him.

"There! I tell you it isn't fancy! He took quite a long breath! Osbert, can you hear me? Open your eyes, and then I shall know."

"By Jove," said another voice, "his eyelids flickered then. I saw it."

"Go on calling him, Mrs. Gaunt. You're right, I believe, it is the only way."

"Another whiff of that oxygen!"

Something like the wind of life swept through him. With an immense effort he opened his eyes.

All that he could see was Virgie's face as she stooped over him.

He knew — though how he could hardly say — that he was lying in her arms. A keen air blew upon him, his hand, which lay at his side, could feel short turf beneath it. He was coming back — beginning to make use once more of his outward senses.

"Do you know me?" she asked, bending over him. Her eyes were full of an intense purpose; there was no shyness, no consciousness — only a vehement desire.

He took a long breath, gathered all his force, and whispered huskily:

"My — wife!"

He saw the sweet face into which he gazed contract pitifully, and the shoulders shake with sobbing.

"There, there, that will do, Mrs. Gaunt," ordered Dr. Dymock peremptorily. "He will be all right now. You're utterly worn out. Lay him down and come away."

"Try — try first, if he will drink," she gasped, while the heart against his ear functioned violently.

He drank, for she told him that he must do so. Obviously she had to be obeyed. Then they laid him down, and raised her up, and took her away, out of his sight. This was too much. He felt it to be an outrage, when he had come back such a tremendous distance, just to be with her. "Virginia," he said, quite clearly.

Dymock bent towards him. "All right, old man, she is close by. You shall go home with her quite soon. She

is a bit tired, that's all. You must try not to be inconsiderate."

A vague smile dawned on Gaunt's face. He made an effort or two, and finally achieved the repetition of the doctor's term. "In-con-sid-erate," he murmured. "That's — that's a word, isn't it?"

"Yes, a word. What did you expect?" asked the doctor gently.

"I thought I had done with words," sighed the patient, lifting his eyes to the grey autumnal sky.

"So did we all — all except your wife," was the reply. "She was certain that you would revive, if she went on calling you."

Gaunt filled his lungs with the sharp air. The brandy they had given him began to course in his veins. "Lift me up," he said.

Dr. Dymock raised him against his knee, and slowly, as though it were something of a feat, he lifted his hand and touched his forehead. Around him was the grassy sloping of the Dale. Workmen's tools and sheds were close by. At a distance were the two cars, in one of which Joey Ferris was bending over some one. Memory returned in a rolling flood.

"Rosenberg. Is he alive?"

"Oh, yes. Broken collar-bone, and I think a rib as well, but I am not sure yet. A good many cuts and bruises, but he'll do."

"You ought to — set his bones?"

"Yes, the delay is bad, but it was inevitable. With you it was a matter of life and death. However, you are all right now. Drink some more of this stuff, and then you had better get home as fast as you can."

Gaunt's eyes were fixed upon the figure of his wife, sitting on a heap of stones not far off. Ferris was standing awkwardly by, evidently trying to comfort her. Her

face was hidden and her handkerchief was held to her eyes.

"Virginia — Virginia's crying," he said in slow surprise. "What for?"

The doctor laughed. "Women are like that when it's all over," was his reply. "Those are tears of joy. She has been strung up to a high point, for I tell you candidly that I think, had it not been for her persistence I should have given you up about a quarter of an hour ago, and gone to attend upon the man who is alive. But she held on. Everybody else thought you were gone."

"She mustn't cry," said Gaunt anxiously.

"She won't, now that she has got you back," was the reply; and the doctor, after administering another drink, smiled kindly and with meaning. "You are a lucky fellow, Gaunt — you have your reward for your forbearance with her last month. Do you remember I told you then that if you had patience you would win her in the end? Well, you did as I asked, and I was a true prophet, was I not?"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MASTERY

"I drew my window curtains, and instead
Of the used yesterday, there laughing stood
A new-born morning from the Infinite
Before my very face!" — ALEXANDER SMITH.

GAUNT's mind never retained any very clear image of the rest of that day. His brain was still partially clouded by the powerful poison which had entered his system. As Dr. Dymock explained to Virginia, there was not only CO_2, but actually the deadly CO itself present in the foul shaft down which he had imperilled his life. CO, as she was further instructed, gets into the blood, and milk and liquid nourishment should be given for some hours, until normal conditions gradually reappear.

The wonderful strength of the patient's heart had enabled him to rally from the toxic fumes, but the action of that powerful organ was, nevertheless, distinctly depressed; and he was content to pass the evening in his bed, lying in a state of not unpleasant semi-consciousness, and trying to adjust his ideas of what had happened.

The doctor came round late that night to see how he was. He had left his other patient fairly comfortable, though the injury to the ribs was serious. The Ferrises were being very kind and hospitable. They were only too anxious to do all they could, since they blamed themselves for the accident — Percy because he had not sufficiently considered the danger of the place; Joey because

she had, as she herself expressed it, "got larking." Now no trouble was too great for her to take. A nurse was already installed, and there was no doubt that Gerald would have every possible care and attention.

Dr. Dymock was well satisfied with Gaunt's condition. He said that a long night's rest would restore him to his usual state, except for the fact that he must go carefully for a few days. He advised him not to get up until about eleven the following day — an order deeply resented by the master of Omberleigh, who could not remember to have breakfasted in bed in his life, except when his leg was broken. It was, however, consoling to be told that he would suffer no permanent effects at all from his awful adventure. If one has to live, one would rather live whole than maimed.

He felt much himself when he descended the stairs next day, and went, as Virginia had begged that he would, to her own sitting-room. She was not there when he made his appearance. He had a few minutes in which to realise how her presence and her touch permeated the place and made it hers. She came running along the terrace very soon, her hands full of spiky dahlias, orange, scarlet, yellow and copper coloured. Entering through the window, she gave him a cheery greeting, pulling off her gardening gloves and apron and laying down her flowers on a table.

He sat watching her with a curious intentness, feeling as if the handling of the situation were with her, waiting for some cue as to the attitude he was expected to adopt.

It was not for two or three minutes that he realised that she was in precisely his own case. Her nervousness was very palpable. She coloured finely when for a moment she met his eyes, and went eagerly to ring the bell for the soup and wine which she had ordered for him. It came, almost before he had had time to object. When

it was set before him, he did succeed, however, in voicing a protest. How could he be expected to eat like this, at odd hours? "I've had breakfast," he urged.

"But you must get up your strength," she told him, with serious solicitude. "Dr. Dymock told me to be sure that you did; and you have had nothing solid since yesterday. Do try and eat it."

As he still hesitated, she sat down beside him, and took the cup of soup in her hands, proffering it. "There was once a man," she said gravely, "and his wife couldn't eat any breakfast. So he stood over her with threats until she did."

He winced, and bit his lip. "Don't joke about it"—hurriedly.

"Why not?" she asked, deliberately provocative. "It *is* a joke now, since it has ceased to hurt me."

"But it will never cease to humiliate me," he muttered.

"Well, perhaps that is good for you," was the mischievous suggestion; and to cover his confusion he was fain to take the cup of soup and drink it, she watching with a glance of covert triumph. She would not let him off until he had eaten and drunk all that was on the tray, which she then carried to a distant table.

He watched her as she returned, work-bag in hand, seating herself upon a high stool, or bunch of cushions which stood near the hearth. She drew out her bit of embroidery, using it obviously as a refuge for eyes and hands. He leaned forward, and sat, chin cupped in palm, watching her.

"Must one be a little unwell in order to secure your sympathy and attention, Virginia?"

"Sick people need taking care of"—with a laugh and a blush—"and I like taking care of people. I always did."

He made no immediate reply, for he was meditating a

plunge. She clung to her work as to a raft in a tumbling sea.

"I was very sick yesterday," he remarked at length.

"For a long time they said you were — dead," she almost whispered.

"I wish they had been right. It would have been better. Virginia! *Why did you call me back?*"

She turned pale. Her work fell upon her knee. "Then I was right!" she muttered. "I suspected, I knew it really! You had some idea of throwing yourself down that place and pretending it was an accident!"

He sat still, without denying it.

"You wanted to die!" she repeated, accusing him. "You wanted to kill yourself! But why? Osbert, you have got to tell me why."

"You know why well enough. To undo the harm I have done you. To set you free."

"Then," she pursued swiftly, "I suppose I am right in my other suspicion, too? You don't want me here! You married me, not because you loved me or wanted me, but to be revenged upon mother through me. . . . And now that you find you are too soft-hearted — or that you have ceased to think that I deserve punishment — you want to get rid of me! But surely there are other ways to do that! You needn't kill yourself! If you don't want me, I can go? . . . Why did you make such a point of my coming back if — if ——"

He made a sound of speechless scorn; but he had turned pale. Clearly this view of the question took him aback. "Of course you know that you are talking nonsense," he said at last.

She was now too much roused to feel nervous. "You call it nonsense," said she, "but if those are your feelings ——"

"My feelings!" he broke in. "You know it's not a

question of that at all, but of your happiness. But if my feelings must be dragged in — if you will have it so — why, use your own sense for a moment! Look at yourself and then look at me! How can any future together be possible? Think of how I have treated you, and how you have requited me! You see the hopelessness of it all. . . . Child, you made your first mistake yesterday. You should have let me die quietly. It didn't hurt a bit, and I was not loath. I was slipping away so easily, it seemed far less trouble to go on than to come back. Nothing but your voice could have compelled me. And, if you had let me go, what a future for you! A few weeks bother, perhaps — and perhaps even a little regret. Then freedom. You would have been set at liberty, as you once told me you longed to be! And *clean,* Virginia, as you also wished! You would have been rich, you might have sent for Pansy, for Tony, for mother! Nothing of mine would have remained but the name you bear, and that you would have changed so soon! And you would have thought kindly of me in the end, because the last thing I did was to bring your lover back to you."

She drew herself up and gazed upon him with scarlet face and eyes brimming with indignant tears. "*My lover!* What have I done that you should speak so to me? You know very well that I have no lover," she said.

He could see that she was deeply wounded. "I don't understand you a bit," she cried, pushing all her work to the ground, and leaning her forehead on her hands. "When I came back, you seemed so glad — really glad. I hoped . . . we might be friends. But what could I do? You didn't like me even to take your hand. If you would really rather have died, of course I am sorry I interfered. I didn't stop to think. It seemed too important, there was only time to act. . . . I just felt that

I — I couldn't let you die like that!" her voice sank away till the concluding words were half inaudible.

"But why not?" he urged, "why could you not? That is the whole point, don't you see?"

She raised her tearful eyes and looked at him as though he were a riddle she could not read. Then, without speaking, she rose, went to her little work-table, opened it and took out a package. She laid it upon his knee, returning to her own seat. "That was why," she said.

His colour rose. "You found that?"

"Dr. Dymock tore open your shirt to make sure whether there was any perceptible movement of the heart. He pulled this out of the — the inner pocket in your shirt, and flung it on the grass. I snatched it up, so that nobody should pry into your private affairs; and then, of course, I could not help seeing that they are — my letters."

She added, as he held the package doubtfully, and said no word: "You see I cannot make things fit together in my mind. If you wanted to be rid of me, why should you keep my letters — *there?*"

"Well, since you have discovered my folly, I had better make a clean breast of it. After all, you have a right to know. It must sound pretty ridiculous, but I suppose that even monsters fall in love. Caliban himself had the taste to desire Miranda, which is horrible and revolting. However, that is what has happened to me. . . . During all the days of your absence, my heart was in the post-bag. Every letter you wrote is here, hoarded like a miser's gold." He slipped the elastic band which held them, and smiled wryly as he showed the worn corners of the paper. "I studied these, and you in them," he went on hurriedly. "I learned each day more of your honesty, your scrupulous accuracy, your economy in spending money which was, as you thought, not your own! . . . Virginia, in my youth your mother wrote me pages of love-letters! The whole

of them were not worth one line of this unconscious self-revelation of yours. . . . You marvellous creature! How you managed to spend so little is what puzzles me. And Tony, too! Yes, old Grover let that out. Were *you* paying for Tony? And if so, from what fund did his expenses come?"

His tone had changed insensibly from tense emotion to frank interest. He raised his head, interrogating her with a look which was almost a smile. She responded eagerly.

"Oh, I managed that quite easily, out of my own allowance. It cost so little! I only paid ten shillings a week for his small top-floor bedroom. Then I paid in ten shillings a week to the board money, and that was all, except his railway journey. You see, I could not send him back to Wayhurst, he would have been so miserable, all alone in the house, poor darling. It would have been hard for him, would it not? When we were all at the sea, and he had not seen the sea for so long! It did him so much good, he enjoyed it all so hugely." . . . She forgot her own affairs and his in the glow of her sisterly affection. He smiled upon her a little sadly.

"But you must be penniless yourself?" he said. "Surely your private account is overdrawn?"

"Oh, *no,* Osbert! You forget how much you gave me and how little I am used to make do with! I have not wanted anything, and I have quite a big balance ——"

"You have a positive genius for sacrifice," he said, laying aside the packet of letters, and studying her. "You would give up everything for Pansy, for Tony, for mother. And now — it being, from your point of view, your duty — you are ready to make the final act of self-abnegation, to sacrifice yourself for Osbert, too?"

His voice had changed. It seemed as if he strove to

keep to his old ironic note; but some other force throbbed in his undertone, and it affected Virginia strangely.

"Of course I am. I promised," she assured him instantly, raising her sweet, puzzled eyes to his tense face.

He gave a laugh which startled her, tossed the package of letters upon the table, rose, and went to the window.

"And are you so ignorant of the meaning of things that you think, after the confession I have just made, that this will satisfy me?" he flung over his shoulder.

She rose too. "I — I don't think I understand," she faltered.

"I'm only a man, just a human man. I want love," he blurted out, his face still averted.

"But isn't that love?" she wondered, as though thinking out a problem aloud for herself. "You are ready to sacrifice everything for me — even your life — because you love me. I am ready to sacrifice — I mean, to do and be what you would have me do and be. Isn't that love?"

"No, it isn't," he bluntly answered.

She grew pale, and twisted her hands tightly together. "Then — then what is it?" she breathed.

Taking no notice of her, he came back to the hearth and rang the bell. Having done so, he remained with one hand on the mantel and one foot on the fender, gazing at the fire, ignoring, as it seemed, her very presence.

"Hemming," said he, when his summons was answered, "will you please bring back the statue and the pedestal which I told you to take away the night Mrs. Gaunt returned?"

The man departed, reappearing in a minute, with one of the other servants, and bringing in first a shaft of black marble, and then a dazzling white figure. They set up both pedestal and statue, in the open space in the centre of the bay window recess.

Virginia had seated herself when she heard the mysterious order given. Gaunt remained silent until the servants had left the room.

Then he moved slowly away from the fire.

"Come and look at it," he said.

Virginia rose, much puzzled, and went to him. They stood side by side contemplating the delicate thing. For a while she was at a loss. Then her eye fell upon the inscription which ran around the base of the figure:

Qui que tu sois, voici ton maître!

Then the colour rushed to her face, for she remembered.

"Oh! Where did you get it?"

"I had it made. I thought it would complete the room."

She stood in the sunlight, which poured through the window, and made a glory of her hair. Many thoughts flowed about her, many memories. Yet as he watched her narrowly, hungrily, he could see that these memories were not bitter.

"How little I knew about it! How little I understood — then," she murmured presently.

"Little blind girl, you understand no better now," said Gaunt.

She lifted to him a solemn gaze. "Osbert, are you sure?"

He put out his hands and gently turned her so that she stood facing him. "Do you suppose that, loving you as I do, I could bear to take you in my arms when I knew that you were fighting your natural inclination in order not to flinch from my touch?" he demanded.

She sighed, as if she felt that he was trying her too hard, but she made no attempt to shake off his light hold. Through her thin sleeves she felt the warmth of his hands.

She felt, too, the slight vibration which, now that she understood, indicated to her the curb that he was using. Suddenly she gave a little gasping laugh, flashing a glance up at him.

"Osbert, if you know all about it, tell me — how does one fall in love?"

"How?" he stammered, for a moment at a loss.

"Why did you show me this?" she whispered, moving the least bit nearer to him, as she indicated the statue. "You mean me to see that love is — is a thing that masters you?"

He signified assent without speech.

"Well, well, master me, then! *Make me understand!*"

He loosed her arms, to stretch out his own. With them thus, almost encircling her, but not touching her, he paused, searching her downbent face. "But the risk," he cried, "you might hate me! . . . And even this — even what I have endured since you came back to me, would be better than have you loathe me."

"You can but try," she managed to stammer, with broken voice; and the words were stifled upon her lips by the pressure of his own, as he snatched her to his heart.

This once only was his thought. This once, if never again! This once, even though she were merely passive, for such invitation could not be foregone. Nay, he must have yielded, even in face of her resistance . . . but she did not resist. She lay at first passive in his hold, while he covered her face, her hair with kisses. . . . Then, when once more he touched her mouth, he could feel her response. She answered his lips with the free gift of her own. She gave him kiss for kiss . . . and time slid out of sight for a while.

. . . . . .

His first coherent words were something like these:

"But it can't be. How could it be? How could any

woman forgive what I made you endure? Even if I were an attractive man, instead of a lame bear."

They were sitting side by side upon the Chesterfield, and as he spoke, Virginia raised her head from his shoulder and contemplated him.

"It is curious," she replied, in tones of candid wonder, "but you know I always thought somehow that this might be. Only things were so strange afterwards, I never could be sure."

"That sounds a bit cryptic," he commented, amused. "Can you explain?"

She smiled with something like mischief. "Are you still certain that you know all about it and I nothing?"

"All about what, in the name of all the elves?"

"About falling in love."

"I know nothing at all about it, except as a man who has tumbled down a precipice knows that he is down."

"Well, I rather think that I am better informed. Shall I try to tell you about it? Quite a long story. I must be careful not to 'prattle.' Ah, Osbert, don't look so! You must let me tease."

"Every time you stab me in the back like that you will have to pay for it in kisses."

"If that's so, I must be careful. But let me begin at the beginning. That fatal day at Hertford House, when you followed us about, your face made a queer impression upon me. I don't mean that I liked it — I didn't, so you need not begin to plume yourself. It was simply that I could not forget it. You had done something to me, though we barely spoke. All the rest of the day, and even when I was at the theatre that evening, the memory of your face, and specially of your eyes, kept swimming into my fancy. When I went to bed I dreamed of you. The shocking part is now to come. Perhaps you won't believe it. *I dreamed exactly what has just happened.*

I thought we were standing just beside this statue, only, of course, in my dream we were in the Gallery; and at the time I wondered how it was that I could see a garden outside, through the window, you said: 'I am quite a stranger, but may I kiss you?' I answered, 'Remember that if you do, it can never be undone.' Then you — you did."

"I did?"

"Yes; and, in the dream, *I liked it!*"

"Virgie!"

"It's true. When I awoke, of course, I just thought it was absurd and silly, as dreams are. But I could not forget it. The dream haunted me, as your face had haunted me. When mother came home from meeting you in town, and told me that you were the man in the Gallery, and that you wanted to marry me, I was such a conceited pussy-cat that after the first surprise I thought it really probable that you had fallen in love at first sight."

"Is it possible?"

"Oh, don't make any mistake. I would not have dreamed of saying 'Yes' if I had not been so beaten down and driven into a corner. But I do think the dream turned the scale. I said to mother that, if, when you came, you turned out to be a person whom I felt I could never like, I should refuse. Then you came. I kept thinking of the ridiculous dream all the time; and when you mentioned the statue — do you remember? — I actually thought that you must have dreamed the same thing. I felt as if you were talking a language that you and I understood: as if you knew that you could convey a secret meaning to me — a message — without words. Oh, it is so difficult to explain, but I felt that ——"

"Yes? For pity's sake go on!"

"As if one day I might come to like you very much."

"As much as this?" he whispered.

"Oh, I never thought — I never imagined, *this*."

There was a little silence.

"And then," he sighed at last, "into the midst of your timid, hopeful sweetness, fell the bomb-shell of my brutality."

She laughed as in scorn at herself. "It *was* unexpected," she owned. "I was so sure that you wanted to make love to me and didn't know how to begin. And I was so afraid of you, and growing more and more so every minute. Oh, Osbert, I *did* suffer."

"Not as I did, for there was no remorse in your agony of mind."

"But there was. I thought I had done so wrong to marry you."

"And I — the moment I read your letter to Pansy, and hers to you, I knew what I had done. I wanted to tell you, but how could I? All one night I wandered about in the rain ——"

"It was the very night, I believe, that I had my second dream. In that, you came and spoke to me quite kindly and tenderly. You said: 'All that is happening now is the dream. Those kisses that I once gave you are the reality.' I awoke, feeling so happy and all excited inside — do you know the feeling? It was dreadful to find it just a dream. Ah, I was miserable, what with the torment of Pansy being so ill . . . and if I had but known it, you were longing to comfort me!"

"Oh," he muttered, "but I did feel abject! I could have crawled to your foot and begged you to set it on my head."

"I am glad you did not. I like you much better as you are now — fresh from a deed of heroism which will make the whole county buzz with your name for weeks to come."

"Oh, great Scott!" in sudden consternation, "I never thought of that!"

"Shall you grudge me my celebrated husband?"

He laughed audibly, a thing so rare that the very sound thrilled her. "You are too adorable! It can't be true! I shall awake." . . .

"Did you ever dream about me?" she whispered when again he released her.

"Night after night. I was always just on the point of making you understand, but it never came off."

"Well, I dreamed of you one more time. That makes three. It was at Worthing, just before I came back to you, and I thought I was searching for you everywhere, all about this house. I told you part of it the other day — about my dreaming of the alterations in this room. But I didn't tell you how it went on. I wandered out into the garden, and presently you came to me, out of a thick mist, and your eyes were shut. You looked just as you did yesterday ——"

"When I came back to you out of the mists of death!"

She gave a long sigh. "How wonderful! . . . Of course, I did not understand the dream, or put any meaning to it. But you were speaking as you came with your eyes shut, and you said, 'She will never come back. Are you coming? No!' . . . When I awoke I knew that I must go to you at once. I knew that I had lingered too long, and that there must be no more delay. But, oh, I was afraid! — I was so desperately afraid!"

He told her of the dreadful day of her return, when he had ridden to sessions in the miserable conviction that he had lost her altogether; and how Ferris had told him of her adventures with young Rosenberg.

"I got home that night absolutely convinced that it was all over," he said.

"Ah!" She turned suddenly and clung to him of her own accord. "And yesterday I thought that all was over, too. It happened so fast; yet it seemed to take years and years. I can't tell you how many thoughts I had, while you turned round from tying up my shoe. . . . You knew, didn't you, that the shoe was just an excuse to coax you away from the brink of the chasm?"

"I wondered."

"Yes, I could see that you wondered, and just as I was casting about in my mind to think what I could say, I heard Joey scream! . . . Then all in a moment, I knew what would happen. I saw your face set . . . and you looked at me, just for one second, a look that seemed to set me on fire. I could have shrieked out in my desperation, but I knew I must not say a word to stop you. I knew you would go down, and that every moment was precious. . . . Osbert, there, in that awful cave, in those few seconds, I grew up. I saw what might be, and I saw that I was going to lose it. I felt as if all my life I had foreseen that this was going to happen to me, and that I never would be able to tell you ——"

"To tell me what?"

"Oh, just this! What I *am* telling you!"

Thereafter, soft laughter, and more kisses.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ESCAPE

"I am the most wise Baviaan, saying in most wise tones:
'Let us melt into the landscape — just us two by our lones.—
People have come in a carriage — calling! . . .
Here's your boots — I've brought 'em — and here's your cap and stick,
And here's your pipe and tobacco. Oh, come along out of it — quick!" — KIPLING.

THEY were pledged to dine at the Chase that night, and had no reasonable excuse for failing to fulfil their engagement. They went accordingly, and Virginia donned for the first time bridal white satin and lace.

Osbert came in from his room when she was nearly ready, his hands full of leather cases, and proceeded to array her in what she considered a most outrageous excess of diamonds. She was loath to spoil his pleasure, and so consented to wear them, to the immense satisfaction of Grover.

When they arrived at the Chase she had to own that Osbert had been wiser than she, for although Lady St. Aukmund called it a "quite informal dinner," they found a party of twenty, including most of the county set. Their entrance was the signal for an ovation for which they had both been unprepared. Osbert's heroism was already known, it appeared, to everybody present; and the attention he received so overwhelmed him that his wife was in dread lest he should retire into his shell and scowl upon his admirers in what the daring girl already described as "his old, bad manner."

However, in response to her wireless telegraphy, he acquitted himself quite creditably, and found himself able not merely to endure but to glory in the chorus of congratulation which he was called upon to receive after the withdrawal of the ladies from table. Now that he knew himself to be, by some miracle of grace which he did not profess to be able to understand, in possession of Virginia's heart, he was free to exult in the praise of her loveliness and charm which was universally expressed.

But when it was over, and the car was carrying them swiftly homeward through a moonless night — when he drew her into his arms and held her there, still half-incredulous of his own bliss — his first words were:

"I say, Virgie, let us bolt — shan't we, darling?"

"Bolt?" she questioned, puzzled.

"Get away from everybody — just you and I together. Let us set out upon our honeymoon. We'll go to the Riviera — or to Rome. Would you like that?"

There was a second's pause before she replied — just time for a tiny doubt to stab him. Then she answered low: "Yes, I *should* like it. Let us go! How strange that I should feel so! But I do!"

"Thank God!" he said with a gasp. "But quite alone, Virgie? Can you do without Grover?"

"But of course, silly! I am accustomed to do without a maid ——"

"Then we'll be off, all unbeknown! I can't stand it, you know, all this act-of-heroism business. It turns me sick! And there'll be Rosenberg calling me his preserver, or some other bad name like that. We can get to London to-morrow, and I will give orders for them to dismantle the house and redecorate while we are away. Isn't that a good scheme?"

She thought it excellent, and approved so warmly that he went on glibly:

"We will buy anything we want in London, and settle a route when we are there. Caunter is quite fit to be left in charge of the place; and I had all the designs prepared by the man who did your room, so you have only to approve and they can get to work."

"If I were talking to Tony, I would say that it is ripping!"

"Then say so to me. Say anything to me. Don't, for pity's sake, be shy of me, Virgie."

"I'll try not. But you must own that you are rather formidable, are you not?"

"You ought to be punished for saying so."

"There! You see, you are still a tyrant, disguise it how you may!"

"Virgie, there is just one thing I am dying to know. May I ask?"

"You may ask; but whether I shall tell you ——"

"Well, it's just this. Did Rosenberg make love to you that day you went motoring with him?"

"No, certainly not! He has never made love to me."

"Honestly, my sweet, he does admire you?"

"I used to think so. He tried to make me think that he was heart-broken the first time we met in Queen Anne Street. But nothing more than that."

"He seems to have managed very badly."

"He managed so badly that I felt more vexed with him than I could have thought possible. He had no right to be so careless of me that day at Bignor. I was in his charge and he put me in a very uncomfortable position. I have not forgiven him. I don't feel the same towards him as I did."

Her voice was quietly judicial, her manner wholly natural. Gaunt could not but realise that here was no rival to be feared.

"You liked him once, though?" he went on, to make himself doubly sure.

"What — before I was married? Yes, I suppose I did. I thought I did. It was just a delightful experience to feel that he thought me pretty. By the way, do you think me pretty, Osbert?"

"No."

"I thought not. But I am, you know."

"Little peacock! You should have heard what everybody was saying of you when you went out of the dining-room to-night! These absurd ears must have been quite hot! How stunning you looked in the diamonds! I am glad I made you wear them. . . . It is a curious thing that, since I first saw you, you have altered completely. I used to think you were like your mother, and now ——"

She broke in eagerly. "So have you! How odd! You are quite, quite different from what you used to be. Ever so much nicer!"

"You won't leave off loving me because I am no longer morose and miserable?"

"No, for I am vain enough to believe that, if I ceased to love you, you might again become morose and miserable."

"What have you done to me, Virgie?" he whispered vehemently.

"Turned the Beast into a Prince, that's all," she laughed, her cheek close-pressed to his.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Mynors was hopelessly bored. Worthing without Gerald or Virgie was simply too dull a hole. It needed but the news of Gerald's accident to make her feel that her sojourn by the southern shore was unendurable. Here was Virgie, her beloved child, who had travelled in a totally unfit state of health for a journey, and must now be very ill, since no word had come from

her for three days! And here was Gerald, laid up close by, at the Ferrises, longing for some one to cheer him and talk to him in a congenial fashion.

If she travelled to Derbyshire she could gratify her maternal anxiety and her wish to see poor dear Gerald, both at the same time. It struck her as the best plan not to announce her forthcoming arrival. Gaunt was an unspeakable brute, a thorough boor, and would refuse to receive her if she gave him half a chance. But if she arrived *à l'improviste,* with the plea of irresistible maternal solicitude, he could not have his door shut in her face. Besides, such a move would put an end, once and for all, to his intolerable attitude towards herself.

Virgie, by flying in the face of her mother's wishes and going back to him, had, of course, settled her own fate. She had insisted upon returning, and now she must stay. It would be a pretty state of affairs indeed if it should get about that Gaunt declined to receive his mother-in-law. Seeing that for her to exist upon the pittance provided was out of the question, she must spend about three months in every year at Omberleigh; and this was most evidently the moment to make a definite coup and show Osbert that she meant to stand no nonsense. To have her in the house would give her poor child courage to stand up to the tyrant. She would soon mend his manners for him, if she once found herself established under his roof.

It was a wild, cold, stormy afternoon when she alighted at the station; and upon learning the distance to the house and the price demanded by the fly-driver for the journey, she rather regretted her decision to come unannounced. However, there was no help for it, so she and her luggage were placed in and upon the vehicle, and they trundled off in the fast-falling, gusty rain.

Mr. and Mrs. Gaunt, since the acquisition of the car,

had made use of Derby as their point of departure. Thus, at the local station, nobody was able to tell Mrs. Mynors that they were away.

She thought she had never seen more desolate country than that which they presently traversed. It seemed to her that they had driven for hours when at last they came to a lodge and a drive gate, blocked by a great cart full of bricks.

A young man in riding clothes was standing by the roadside and addressing vigorous reproof to the driver of the cart, who had knocked against the gate-post with his wheel. This young man stared in mute astonishment at sight of the carriage from the station, and the lady with two or three large trunks. He said nothing, however, and after some delay they passed through and on, along the now almost pitch-dark avenue.

In the centre of the gravel sweep was a place where they were mixing mortar. The men were just striking work for the day, and upon the front doorsteps sacking had been laid down. Within was a scene of the utmost confusion — partially stripped walls, canvas-covered floor, heaps of boards, tubs and trestles.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the visitor in horror. "Is this what my child is called upon to put up with?"

The driver descended and rang a jangling peal upon the bell. After some delay, Hemming, in a linen coat, with a green baize apron, came in astonishment to the door.

"Is Mrs. Gaunt at home?" demanded the lady regally.

"No, ma'am, she is not."

"Mr. Gaunt, then?"

"No, ma'am; they are both away — and likely to be for some time to come."

"Away? Do you mean that they will not be home any time to-day?"

"Not for some weeks, ma'am, as I understood. They talk of being home for Christmas," said Hemming mildly, gazing with apprehension at the driver, who showed signs of being about to unload the trunks.

"You must be misinforming me. I am Mrs. Gaunt's mother. Had they been leaving home, I should certainly have been made aware of their plans. I insist upon coming in. I believe that Mr. Gaunt has given you instructions to say they are not at home to visitors, but that will not apply to me."

"I assure you, ma'am, that Mr. and Mrs. Gaunt left on Monday for the continong — what part I do not as yet know."

"Did Mrs. Gaunt take Grover with her?"

"She did not, ma'am. Perhaps you would like to see Miss Grover?"

"Send her to me at once," was the reply, while the speaker's heart swelled with resentment. He had taken Virgie away, somewhere out of reach, out of touch with those who loved her! What might she not be enduring?

Grover presently came along the dismantled hall. She wore an expression of complacency which made Mrs. Mynors feel ready to strike the woman.

"I come here," she began, "to see how my poor daughter is, and I find she has been hurried away, nobody knows where. What information can you give me?"

Grover wiped her hands upon her apron doubtfully. Evidently she had been engaged upon the work of packing up the house ready for the onslaught of the British workman.

"Dear me, ma'am, what a pity you didn't send a wire to say you was coming! I could have saved you the trouble," said Grover. "Mrs. Gaunt is very well indeed, and Mr. Gaunt and she is gone off upon their honeymoon, ma'am. I daresay they'll be away a couple of months."

"I suppose I may at least claim shelter for the night in my daughter's house?" demanded Mrs. Mynors with a voice which shook with mortification.

"Well, ma'am, I don't hardly know where we could put you," was the meek reply. "The whole house is upset, for it is to be redecorated from top to bottom. I do really think, ma'am, that you would be more comfortable at the station hotel. We are all upside down, as you can see." She turned to the butler. "Hemming," said she, "wouldn't it be better if you was to pay the driver and let him go? Then we can give Mrs. Mynors a cup of tea, as I know Mrs. Gaunt would wish, and send her down to Derby in the car, to catch the late express to town. Wouldn't that be best, ma'am?" As Mrs. Mynors hesitated, she added: "There's but one room in the house fit for you to sit down in, and that is Mrs. Gaunt's boodwor. I have been so busy helping above stairs, I haven't had a minute yet to pack it up. This way, ma'am."

Feeling that opposition was useless, Mrs. Mynors picked her dainty way along the hall, while Hemming paid off the fly-driver and lifted the trunks into the entrance, out of the rain. Grover, as she went, kept up a running fire of information.

"A dark passage, ma'am, but you will see a great difference when the alterations are made. A window is to be knocked through here, and the bushes outside cleared away, and a bit of a Dutch garden put in, so Mrs. Gaunt tells me. This is her own room, ma'am, that Mr. Gaunt had done up for a surprise for her when she come home. She was pleased, too. I never see her so delighted, pretty dear."

Mrs. Mynors walked in. The last ray of sunshine slanted over the wide landscape without, and gilded the

delicate colouring of the room. She stood there, noting every detail.

"I wish you could have seen her, ma'am, the night before they started off," purred Grover. "Lady St. Aukmund, she give a dinner-party in her honour, and Mr. Gaunt had had all the family jools re-set. She wore white satin, ma'am, and with the diamonds and all she did look a perfect picture. We heard afterwards as all the county was talking about her. Mr. Gaunt, it's pretty to see how proud he is of her. But it is but natural they should want to be by themselves a bit at first. Everybody is talking about Mr. Gaunt's courage, the way he went down the mine after that young Mr. Rosenberg! There! It was a fine deed, wasn't it, ma'am? Sit down, I will bring you some tea directly."

She left the room, and Virginia's mother, her mouth set in hard lines, stood gazing about her. She thought of Osbert as she first remembered him, in his impetuous youth. What magic wand had touched him now, raising up love and youth from their ashes? Was he indeed lavishing upon Virgie — Virgie, her little girl, her willing drudge, to whom she had deputed all disagreeable duties — the torrent of devotion which she might once have had?

Very sincerely at that moment did she repent her own inconstancy. Had she had the courage to stick to Osbert, her fidelity would have been rewarded quite soon. He was not as rich a man as Bernard had been when first they married — at least, she supposed not. Yet she knew that with him for a husband she would never have been suffered to dissipate a fortune. His strong hand would have been over her. She would have been governed instead of governing.

She stood in the window and turned her eyes upon the

delicate statue of Love. Idly she read the inscription around its base. Then her eye caught a little brass plate affixed to the black marble shaft near the top.

O.G. V.G. JUNE 30th, 19—

It was the date of their first meeting.

She was still contemplating this, in profound reflection, when Grover came back with the tea.

"You must excuse deficiencies, ma'am. Hemming have locked up pretty near all the silver; with so many workmen about you need eyes in the back of your head. Was you looking at the statue, ma'am? Mr. Gaunt had it made, so Mrs. Gaunt tells me, to commemorate their first meeting. As I daresay you know, ma'am, it was love at first sight with him. And who can wonder? Well, he deserves to be happy, doesn't he? For he risked all his future, and hers, to save that young man. They say he was as near dead as anybody could be, to come back at all; but Mrs. Gaunt, she wouldn't let them give up.

"She sat there, so Ransom tells me, holding his head, nursing him in her arms as she sat on the grass, and calling to him, so pitiful, there was hardly a dry eye, ma'am, for every one thought she was speaking to a dead man. Then, when his eyelids flickered, it seemed like a miracle. So at last he opens his eyes, and, 'Do you know me?' she says. And he answers very low, but you could hear it all right: '*My wife!*' he says.

"Just fancy, ma'am! And with that she broke down, and cried till they couldn't stop her, with the sudden relief. More than two hours she had been crouching there, cramped up on the ground."

Mrs. Mynors was too interested even to feign indifference. She made Grover give her all the details of the expedition, and relate exactly what had taken place.

Grover was more than willing, and the tale lost nothing in the telling.

"Like a pair of children, they was," she concluded, "when they started off on their travels. Him laughing and talking like a boy going home for the holidays. Making their escape, they called it, for of course the whole countryside was buzzing with the story of what he had done, and the carriages and cars came up the drive so fast, Hemming was to and fro the whole day taking in cards, telling them that Mr. Gaunt was not feeling quite equal to seeing visitors, when all the time he was upstairs with her, packing their things for the escape!

"Well, ma'am, we always knew that a wife was what he wanted, but I never dared to hope for such a sweet young lady as he chose. They say marriages are made in heaven, don't they? There's not much doubt but what this one was, I take it upon myself to say!"

. . . . . .

Virginia's mother finished her tea in a speculative silence. Grover left her to herself, but when she had eaten and drunk she did not seem inclined to linger. Rising, she went to the window and stood awhile gazing out upon the activities of many gardeners, hard at work below the terrace upon the beginning of the bride's rock garden. Her face seemed to grow sharp and pinched as her eyes followed the busy scene.

Turning, she contemplated the marble Love; and her pretty teeth bit into her lower lip, while her breath came hissingly.

Made in heaven! A wild laugh broke from her. Its mirthless cadence fell hatefully upon the silence. Nebuchadnezzar, when he cast his victims into the burning fiery furnace, was, it is recorded, thankful to find them coming forth unscathed. This woman had cast her daughter, bound, into the hellish gulf of a loveless mar-

riage. Now that she saw her walking free and companied by the husband whose very soul she had redeemed, there was no joy, no relief, but a bitterness of hate which transformed the pretty features into a mask of horror.

Suddenly she snatched her wraps, as if the scene were unbearable. She hastened into the disembowelled hall and, putting on her coat amid many apologies from Grover for enforced inhospitality, went out to the waiting car.

. . . . . .

It was her only glimpse of her daughter's home for many years to come. This was not from lack of invitation, for all Osbert's hatred, and every lingering grudge, vanished in the sunshine of his personal happiness. It was simply that her narrow soul was torn with envy.

The sound of Tony's laughter and shouting soon reechoed through the garden and stables; the ring of his pony's hoofs could be heard along the avenue. Pansy's invalid chair set out upon the terrace the following summer, where Virgie had once lain, watched secretly by her husband from the shelter of his den. Even the Rosenbergs came for a week's motoring, when Gerald had practically recovered from his hideous accident.

Boys, girls, dogs, cats — a perpetual stream of youth ebbed and flowed about the erstwhile silent place. But Virginia the elder came not.

Even when Osbert the second made his glorious appearance — when bonfires were lit in the village, and Lord and Lady St. Aukmund stood sponsors at a stately baptismal ceremony — the mother still held aloof. Virginia's unhappiness she could have borne. Virginia the radiant young wife and mother, central point of attention, mistress of Gaunt's heart and all that he possessed, was a perpetual reminder of what she herself had flung away. With her daughter's life as the price, she had purchased freedom from want. Yet, from the time when it

dawned upon her that the girl was miraculously saved, she never knew a moment free from the gnawing tooth of jealous bitterness.

The joy which these two had so perilously snatched from the jaws of destiny was more than she dare contemplate.

THE END

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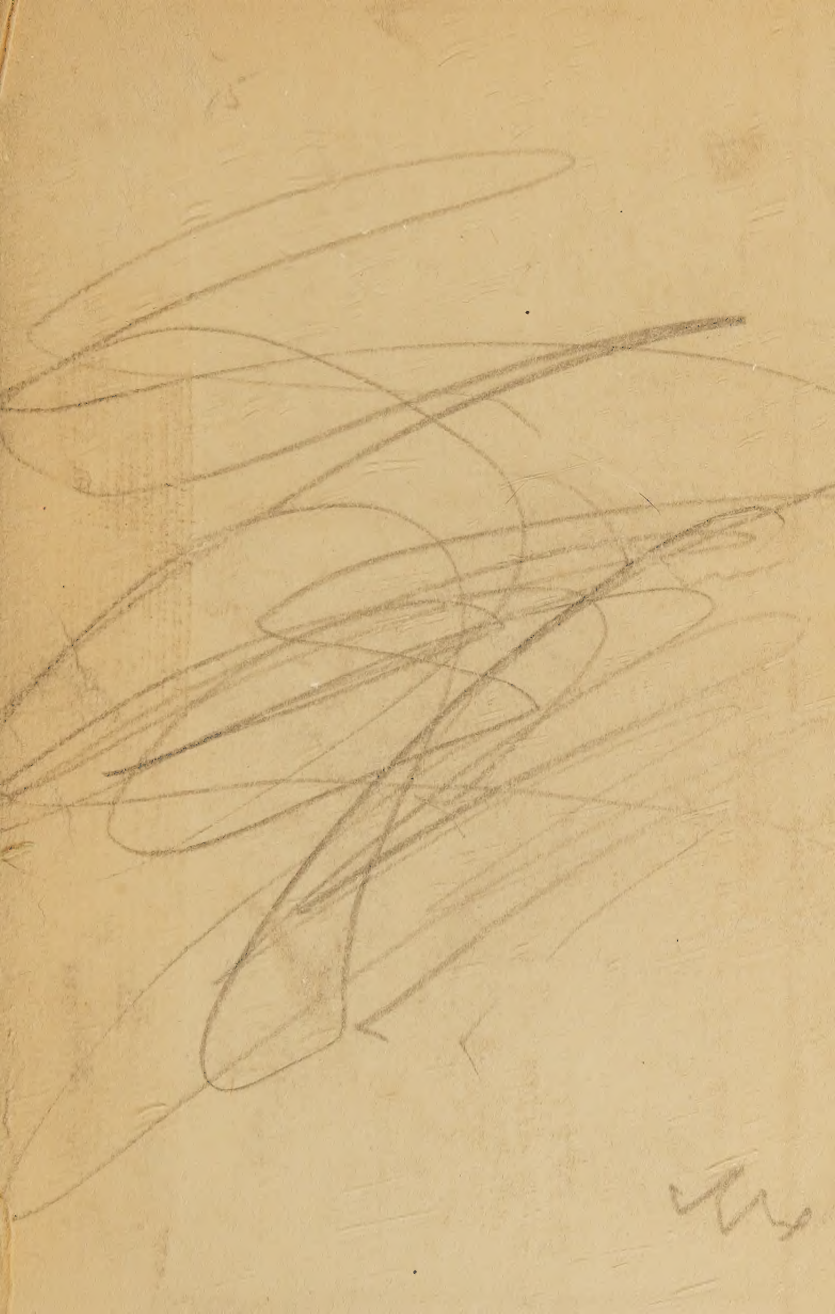
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